

CATASTROPHE AND COMMUNITY: MISTRAL, DITTBORN, ZURITA, AND
THE FRAGILE DEMAND

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This project considers twentieth century and contemporary poetic encounters with community, catastrophe, and fragility within the Chilean context. The project scrutinizes and seeks to go beyond the totalizing and forceful articulation of community found in Neruda's influential poetics, in relation to which the figures that compose the body of my dissertation (Gabriela Mistral, Eugenio Dittborn, and Raúl Zurita) imagine communities that are eminently more aware of their collective socio-political, religious, and ethical "inoperativity."

The first chapter of my dissertation undertakes a critical rereading of Neruda's *Canto general*. My reading highlights the figure of a negative catastrophe (the Spanish conquest), and a positive catastrophe (the subaltern revolution). Within this catastrophic conception of historical oppression and emancipation, I analyze how the poet-prophet makes of death an operative condition by transfiguring it into the ground for a future resurrection of the subaltern community.

My second chapter foregrounds Gabriela Mistral's imagining of community as an infinite confrontation with its own fragility via a confrontation with Christ's divine weakness. I contrast the formal and thematic "poverty" of Mistral's poetry with the elaborateness of her *modernista* precursors and contemporaries, linking her interest in

poetic “desolation” with her lifelong engagement and identification with marginalized social groups. Unlike Neruda—who speaks on behalf of the same disenfranchised groups—Mistral, I argue, makes of fragility a constitutive trait of her ideal, Christian community.

Chapter three contrasts the “unpolluted” models of community which both the dictatorial and democratic imaginaries propose with the dissenting and “sullied” representation found in the artistic works of Eugenio Dittborn. I contrast both the dictatorial and democratic gestures of national “cleansing” with Dittborn’s constant reminder—through innovative uses of material waste in his visual production—that the national community is always-already “stained.”

Chapter four analyzes Raúl Zurita’s “inoperative” vision of community as it must live with and suffer from the knowledge of poetry’s resurrectional incapacity. Contrary to the critical view that categorizes Zurita’s work as “redemptive,” I argue that his poetry negates salvation and therefore cannot be easily recuperated by the socio-political discourses of reconciliation and national “healing.”

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Osvaldo de la Torre was born in Los Angeles, California. He lived many years in México, and moved back to the United States at the age of fifteen. He studied English and American literatures at Baylor University, and then went on to study Hispanic literature at the University of Notre Dame. As a doctoral student in the Romance Studies Department at Cornell University, Osvaldo has focused on Spanish American poetry, specifically on the Chilean context.

To the poets and artists whose work inspired this dissertation

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INTRODUCTION

Asolar, Desolar—Political Catastrophe and Poetry

Political events hold the potential to radically restructure a nation's social, cultural and economic configuration. A nation that experiences such an event (a coup d'état, in my reading) will be regarded—by the forces now actively holding the reins of official political control and which in many instances prepared the very conditions of emergence for the event in question—as dangerously close to systemic fragmentation. A fragmentation, moreover, of an exaggerated scale, which would not be simply local or atomized, but which would jeopardize the entirety of social and political life developing within the nation's frontiers: a fragmentation, in other words, of radically destructive consequences. The hyperbolic treatment granted to and by which the event attains its descriptive force is perhaps more sufficiently conveyed by a term such as "ruinous collapse," inasmuch as this expression attains its weight by incorporating the image of a material devastation that would symbolize an event that, while not purely taking place at the level of materiality, is nonetheless treated—by emphasizing its immediacy, its inevitability, its dangerous palpability—as fundamentally so. To its interpreters and promoters, this ruinous collapse precedes and stands as the very justification for the coup's interventionist gesture; yet it also outlives this intervention, for the fragmentary threat is not altogether halted—not, at least, with one decisive blow. Because ruinous collapse remains a dormant yet persistent menace, forced intervention must be prolonged: the state of exception becomes the rule. In the interest of preemptively arresting the potential breakdown of the socio-political fabric, which is seen as the most urgent task at hand, the newly self-

instated State will devise a platform that, at both the level of discourse and of implementation, will highlight its positivity as a necessary and beneficial task of unification. In other words, in order to better convince the public, as well as to justify more easily the potentially violent consequences of its task, official rhetoric, following the revolutionary violence instigated by the coup in order to take effective control of the State, will speak not so much in terms of a fragmentation that needs to be contained, but in terms of a unification concomitant with the rise of the new times, with the establishment of a new political paradigm. What thus becomes highlighted is the constructive rather than destructive nature of both the immediate, political future and the social policies that will accompany it. The new State takes care of defining itself as an edifying rather than destructive force. If destruction must be brought up (and it most often is) it is always done so with relation to the older regime, which it was absolutely necessary to depose oneself of. “Destructive” thus becomes an adjective under which and *as* which the entirety of the former political program becomes defined. A chronology is thus devised, which may be schematized in the following way: the nation was being destroyed; intervention arrested this destruction from being total; the time for reconstruction now begins.

Like many other Latin American critics and intellectuals, Chilean historiographer Tomás Moulian sees the role of the contemporary State as increasingly subordinated to the abstract power of Capital; this becomes, in fact, one of the main functions (if not the most important one) of the neoliberal State: to ensure the free mobility of financial transactions and commodities. The military dictatorship in Chile is generally seen as working to achieve this goal (indeed, as having more or less

attained it): the liberation of the market, which possesses the intrinsic capacity to regulate itself and promote social welfare if not intervened upon. From an economic standpoint, the chronology proposed above in relation to the socio-political sphere that ultimately justified the Chilean military's decisive intervention reproduces a very similar movement of destruction, intervention, and reconstruction. In this case, forced intervention at the service of the market becomes an equally pressing necessity: "In the beginning," according to Moulán, "was the chaos of the democratic-populist State," which arises as a consequence of the "decisionist" and over-regulatory practices of Allende's Unidad Popular government in matters pertaining to the economy, and which forces the military to intervene lest the nation undergo a total economic collapse; subsequently, economic reconstruction translates into allowing the "decisions over economic exchanges to be carried out through an automatic mechanism—that of the market" (45).¹ The hope for the actors involved in carrying-out this process is that the fear of regressing into the previous state of chaos will lead to a collective internalization of the concept of a free-market as the true way of economic progress, as "eternal consent."

The military junta that deposed Salvador Allende described his tenure through a discourse of destruction. Thus, according to the documents issued on the day of the coup (11 September), Allende's government had, from the start, demonstrated its malevolent character in the fact that it violated both individual and collective rights

¹ All translations into English are mine unless otherwise indicated in the Works Cited.

(“in breaching [*al quebrantar*]² the fundamental rights of freedom of expression, right to education, right to strike, right to petition, right to property, and the rights in general to a decent and secure existence” [“Bandos” 380]); it undermined the nation’s unity by promoting a fictitious class war (“the same Government has broken the nation’s unity by artificially promoting a sterile and oftentimes violent class struggle”); finally, it destabilized the equilibrium implicit in the division of powers (“[it] has broken the mutual respect which the various State Powers must exhibit amongst themselves”). To the destructive nature of the populist regime’s mode of governance, the junta opposed its own nondestructive and indestructible façade: “The Armed and Police Forces reiterate to the Chilean population the absolute unity [*unidad absoluta*] of its commanding forces and troops as well as its unfaltering decision [*decisión inquebrantada*] to fight until the end in order to overthrow the Marxist Government” (382). By intervening to remedy this destructive situation, the sovereign Junta, in effect, “suspend[ed] representation in order to found [its own] regimes of representation” (Thayer, “De regreso” 229).

While Allende’s political administration was tirelessly portrayed as an inherently ruinous or destructive system, the military Junta, in fact, may be said to have incarnated this very description, to the point of instituting its own genesis through a literal act of destruction: the bombardment of the Presidential seat of

² The Spanish *quebrantar*, used in the Bandos (official mandates) issued by the Junta, has an explicitly physical denotation. *To break*, which is not used in all my translations, would be its English counterpart.

power—Palacio de La Moneda—at the hands of the Chilean Air Force.³ Moulian interprets this act of architectural demolition as something of a political hyperbole—pragmatically excessive yet symbolically powerful. Bombing the site in which Allende had barricaded himself proved nothing short of redundant, since Allende’s presidential authority had, for all practical purposes, been already eradicated.

Following Willy Thayer’s recuperation—within the context of the Chilean coup—of Benjamin’s thoughts on the relation between sovereignty, state of exception, and image, I would suggest that the Moneda’s bombardment as visual spectacle constituted an instance of the image unfolding under a “mythic function,” that is, as obeying, in Thayer’s words, the “prerogative that the representation of sovereignty must be founded by resorting to the exceptionality of the image,” and that, furthermore, “the greater the representation and foundation [in this case, of a dictatorial regime], the greater the violence” that is required (“Aura” 323, 319). Citing Benjamin, Thayer adds that, in addition to acting as the sovereign visualization of a founding moment, the function of the mythic image is to “‘establish frontiers,’ assign identities and hierarchies, ‘impart honor,’ ‘threaten,’ ‘assign blame,’ ‘give death,’ homogenize”—all processes which the Chilean dictatorship subsequently and forcefully carried out.⁴ “The politico-military declaration of the state of exception

³ In addition to La Moneda, the President’s official residence was also bombed. On this respect, the Junta stated that, “The Presidential Residence located on Tomás Moro [Street] had to be bombed for having offered Resistance . . . to the Armed and Police Forces” (“Bandos” 382).

⁴ The concept of the mythic image is opposed, in Benjamin, by that of the “dialectic image.” Although I cannot dwell on this concept, I would simply point out that the dialectic image neither founds nor conserves regimes or representation. In Thayer’s words, “The purely destructive *image*, the *dialectic image* that neither founds nor conserves representation, would not belong to violence . . .” (“Aura” 320; author’s emphasis). For Benjamin on the dialectic image, see *The Arcades* 456-88 (Convolute N, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress”).

which lasted from 1973 to 1980,”⁵ Thayer summarizes, possessed a character that was “clearly foundational” (“Crítica” 77).⁶

In its modality as mythic image, the Moneda’s bombardment thus literally and symbolically produced the socio-political clean slate needed for the erection of the Junta’s project. Moulian likewise interprets this destructive gesture as symbolically imperative: for him, it signified the total erasure of the political past, thereby facilitating the institutionalization of the military regime’s own political and ideological agenda: “The Government Palace’s aerial bombing express[ed] a resolve to produce a *tabula rasa*, to construct a new state over the ruins of the previous one. The ‘destruction of the preceding State’ was accomplished in such an act. The ideal conclusion to this process would have been the President’s death. His physical salvation was thus left to chance” (30). The suicide that resulted from “leaving to chance” the leader’s fate, that is, Allende’s physical extinction, was merely icing on the cake: it represented “the formalization of an already-executed death.”

Thayer rightly highlights the heavy reliance which sovereignty (political or

⁵ In 1980, a new constitution (which replaced the old constitution of 1925) was approved by voters in a national plebiscite convened and controlled by the Junta. The constitution demanded, among other things, the transition from a military to a civil government, to be carried out in eight years from the time the document was approved (1988). Still in effect today, the constitution has undergone a number of significant amendments, most of which have attempted to eliminate the more authoritarian aspects that gave unprecedented powers to the executive branch.

⁶ Thayer reads the Junta’s catastrophic act of foundation as the reverse of Benjamin’s divine violence—which is non-foundational, non-mythic, purely destructive—adding that it represented the “expropriation of the *true state of exception* (as *general revolutionary strike* or *purely-destructive violence*, or *annihilation of the State*) into the founding violence of law” (“Crítica” 82; author’s emphasis). Likewise, Nelly Richard states that “Events in Chile during the time Dittborn’s work was developing [Dittborn’s work is discussed in Chapter 3] were marked above all by the military coup of 1973. In order to give their arbitrary seizure of power the guise of a *founding moment*, the military regime had to forbid the past. The whole national-symbolic content of pre-1973 memory was censored” (“Nosotros” 48; emphasis added). For Benjamin on divine and mythical violence, see “Critique.” For Benjamin’s discussion of a related concept, the “destructive character,” which in many respects is synonymous to divine violence, see “The Destructive.”

otherwise) places on metaphors of architectural demolition in order to narrate and substantiate its own foundation. Thus, in an essay in which Thayer situates Descartes as a philosophical precursor to this will to event on the part of (philosophical and subjective) sovereignty, he foregrounds the use of such metaphors, inviting his reader, I would argue, to make the fairly obvious link with the Chilean dictatorial imperative for demolition:

The new demands as its condition the “erasure” (*effacer*) of the old. There is no word, principle, or sovereign law if it does not emanate from a pure decision. . . . It is a matter of overturning “the house one inhabits,” to declare the *state of exception* vis-à-vis one’s inheritance. The modern city demands “uprooting” the old city, making of it a “plain” (*pleine*) or “white canvas” upon which the new universality, the sovereign city, can be neatly sketched. (“De regreso” 221-22; author’s emphasis)⁷

In the military Junta’s view of political determination (as in Descartes’s analogous view of subjective determination or sovereignty), it was not a matter of “correction” or reform, one of “suppression” and, just as importantly, of “substitution” of the former, noxious political program (“De regreso” 231). Acting as a sovereign subject, the Junta revealed itself not as “contemplative,” but as “active-possessive” (233). The former political administration of the national “household” was invalidated, suspended, and then followed by the imposition of a new administration and Master of the household.

In the interest of national consolidation (and this is true of consolidation under dictatorial as well as democratic regimes), circumstances are thus such that an act of destruction seems required and justified. Following a regime’s catastrophic assumption of authority, (re)construction is often accompanied by a practice of “cleansing,” the ultimate goal of which is to suppress or neutralize any potentially-

⁷ Thayer’s quotations are taken from Descartes’s “Discourse on Method” and “Meditations.”

disruptive actors who may hamper the officially-sanctioned and publicly-desired movement towards unity and reconstruction. Likewise, it becomes imperative to neutralize those spaces (urban as well as natural) which hold the potential for poetical and/or political effervescence. In this sense, dictatorship perpetuates the violence of its founding moment, concerned as it is with conquering the political field and maintaining itself in the legitimacy of this conquest.⁸

What relationship, we may now ask, can be established between a violent, evental, catastrophic gesture of political foundation and poetry? Can one, put differently, find a poetic parallel to the political catastrophe that was the coup? And if so, which poet's work would represent or embody this catastrophic mode? Which poet or poets would be concerned with giving presentation to the catastrophe? On the other hand, if we can locate a poetic tradition of catastrophe within the Chilean context, can we also locate a non-catastrophic poetics, an alternate poetic discourse that provides the inverse logic to that which sees the catastrophe as a rupture that inaugurates a new symbolic universe, and which would instead put forward ways of narrating history, interpreting political change, grappling with loss, experiencing death, envisioning and undergoing the practice of community that would not be catastrophic, that is to say, that would not presuppose the notion of an event as either the foundation or destiny of a social or symbolic configuration?

Once again, Thayer's reflections on the relation between art and politics around the time of the 1973 coup may begin to offer an answer. In a controversial

⁸ I am paraphrasing here an observation which Thayer makes regarding Cartesian (sovereign) doubt. For methodic doubt, "it is a matter of conquering itself (sustaining itself) and maintaining itself (conserving itself) in conquest" ("De regreso" 238).

essay titled “El Golpe como consumación de la vanguardia,” Thayer interprets the specific act of bombing La Moneda as sharing a “structural” link with the avant-garde *will to rupture*; in this sense, the coup represented the paradoxical culmination of the avant-garde’s general aesthetic. In Thayer’s words, “La Moneda, the Republic, the State ablaze is, at the same time, the most proper representation of the ‘will to event’ [‘*voluntad de acontecimiento*’] of the avant-garde, a will uncannily accomplished by the coup d’état as the point of no return of the avant-garde and as the big bang of globalization” (“El Golpe” 15). This thesis, understandably, gave rise to discomfort and criticism on the part of Chilean artists and critics, particularly Nelly Richard, who argued that Thayer unjustly equated the Chilean avant-garde with a destructive and blind drive to nihilism.⁹ Nonetheless, in this text, as in others written in response to such criticisms, Thayer insists that both the military coup against the political “tradition” and the avant-garde “coup” against the artistic tradition exhibit a “will to dismantle [their respective] institution of representation” (“El Golpe” 19). Thayer looks specifically at Nelly Richard’s influential book, *Márgenes e Instituciones* (1987), wherein Richard, according to Thayer, canonizes the experimental artistic works emergent around the time of the coup as expressions of a renewed avant-garde aesthetics under the name of *Escena de Avanzada*. Thayer then highlights the heavy use of a semantics of architecture, demolition, and overall rupture on the part of Richard in order to articulate the general project of this artistic movement (describing the *Avanzada* in terms of “dismantling,” “exploding,” “ruptures,” “crushing,” “toppling,” “fracturing,” “transgressing,” etc. [“El Golpe” 19]). If the avant-garde and

⁹ For Richard’s critique, see “Lo político.”

the dictatorship share anything in common, Thayer adds bluntly, it is a “hatred toward the past” (20), to the extent that the military gesture would be concerned with destroying the Marxist past, while the artistic gesture would be concerned with destroying the representational past, inaugurating through this act of destruction a new regime of representation.¹⁰ In Thayer’s summary,

What I outlined in “El Golpe como consumación de la vanguardia” was the structural complicity between the coup d’état and the *Escena de Avanzada*, this last one understood by Nelly Richard as the re-foundation of the visual field; that is, as a set of [artistic] practices that precipitate the *state of exception* vis-à-vis the rules of art in order to re-found art starting from different rules, starting from a different political constitution as outlined in *Márgenes e Instituciones*. This *structural complicity* was seen in how the Dictatorship replicated the event of a founding *state of exception* that suspends and then re-founds the Constitution. (“Crítica” 77; author’s emphasis)

My dissertation suggests, among other things, that a poetic “precursor” to the catastrophic manner in which politics and history are both narrated and constructed by the dictatorial imaginary (and which Thayer sees *structurally* reflected in the avant-garde’s ruptural gesture with respect to the past) may be found in the Marxist-inspired teleological narration of history and emancipation found in Pablo Neruda’s *Canto general* (1950). While Neruda, of course, is both politically and ideologically located at the opposite end of the dictatorship’s Right-wing, pro-capitalist, neoliberal agenda, his poetic narrative of Latin American history mirrors the dictatorial structure of political rupture and foundation. If catastrophe designates for the Marxist Neruda the people’s eventual uprising, the coming revolution, or the general strike, for the

¹⁰ Thayer makes a further link between dictatorship and avant-garde by means of Idelber Avelar’s reflections on torture: “If, as Idelber Avelar points out, ‘torture appears as the violent break of all representational apparatuses,’ some link must be shared between torture and the avant-garde, between torture and post-Coup expressions of the avant-garde, [which function] as the *torture of representation* (“El Golpe” 25; emphasis added). See Avelar, *The Letter*.

Pinochet dictatorship, as we have seen, it designates the demolition of the Marxist edifice and the institution of a new regime. In both cases, the former political and social configuration that determined the community's functioning is violently erased by means of a foundational event.

The question I posed above (mainly, is there a poetry of catastrophe in Chile [as there is seemingly a politics of catastrophe]?) can therefore be answered by the well-known name of "Pablo Neruda." An answer to the opposite yet complimentary question (is there a non-catastrophic poetry?) can be found, I would argue, in the name of "Gabriela Mistral." *Asolación* and *desolación*:¹¹ if the Nerudian community is defined by the foundational and resolved act of *asolar*, the Mistralian community is defined by the effects of *desolar*. The Nerudian community *asuela* (destroys, topples down the edifice of tradition, the oppressive structure put in place by the Conquest and by imperialism); the Mistralian community is *desolada* (by the experience of pain and loss, by confronting the Other's weakness in the defeated figure of Christ). The Nerudian community seeks to overcome defeat and fragility; the Mistralian community dwells in its fragile constitution and in fact turns this seemingly negative trait into a demand. If the Nerudian *asolación*, catastrophe, and community reflect, illuminate, and ultimately help us think about the logic and operation of the dictatorship (violence, demolition, foundation, exceptionality), the Mistralian *desolación*, catastrophe, and community, on the other hand, open up a space to reflect

¹¹ *Asolar* can be translated as "to destroy," "to ruin," or "to devastate." While *desolar*, according to the Real Academia Española, can be taken as synonymous with *asolar*, its more common meaning is "to afflict," "to cause anguish," "to sadden." This simultaneous semantic affinity and distance between *desolar* and *asolar* is positively operative in the relation I am seeking to establish between Neruda and Mistral.

upon the processes and dilemmas of the post-dictatorship (memory, loss, fragility, and so on).

The two proper names of Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral—and the literary corpus behind each—allow me to lay out the general resolve of my project, which may be described as a critique of the notion of community as self-present and self-assured, and an attempt to promote the idea of community as a fragile configuration that perpetually undoes itself and that is thus never one with its own idea, concept, or constitution. This dual “objective” is pursued, moreover, through artistic works (mainly poetic, but also visual) emergent specifically from the Chilean cultural context. The reason for my project’s “narrowness” in terms of its primary corpus is not only the important fact that the Chilean context already constitutes a vast, rich field in its own right (to which this project, I readily admit, will not do justice), but also because it is my perception that its contingent historical processes have provided fertile ground (too often, of course, at the expense of human suffering and life) for novel and sophisticated theoretical and cultural articulations of community. A parallel may here be drawn between the European and Chilean “experiences”: if European thinking’s strongest theorizations of community emerge in response to the experience of the Second World War (as a critique of and an attempt to move away from the Nazi proposal of community founded upon destiny and blood), the Chilean theoretical and artistic fields arguably produce their most sophisticated articulations of community from the confrontation with a similarly scarring experience: in response to the idea of community as carried out by the repressive State (particularly the Pinochet dictatorship, which comprises the main historical background of two of my chapters).

Theodor Adorno's doubt and Paul Celan's anguished faith in the power and relevance of poetry are shared by artists, poets, and intellectuals all over Chile, who continue to debate the possibility or impossibility of art to represent political and social trauma, as well as its capacity or failure to establish a relation with the victims of violent death, torture, and disappearance. If on one side of the Atlantic we encounter well-known figures like Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Giorgio Agamben, on the other side of the Atlantic we encounter names like Nelly Richard, Willy Thayer, Patricio Marchant, and Miguel Valderrama. My belief is that forging a dialogue between these two fields may yield interesting, poetic, evocative, provocative, and even (why not) productively antagonistic or differing results.

Seeking to attend to what I perceive as a lack of critical engagement with theories of community within the Hispanic field of poetic criticism, my project thus establishes a dialogue between poststructuralist analyses of community and the Chilean field of cultural and poetic production. My intent is to display the specificity of a poetic-artistic milieu while simultaneously highlighting its intersections with and original contributions to a theoretical enterprise of general concern: to repeat, an articulation of community that moves beyond the categories of identity, property, origin, and finality, and that instead conceives of community as painfully frail and inconclusive. In this way, while the scope of my analysis is limited, the theoretical apparatus through which I read this tradition is more inclusive. In forging relations between poststructuralist thoughts on community and Latin American (specifically Chilean) theorizations of "collective" memory, mourning, reconciliation, and death, I recognize that a critical exchange between these two distinct theoretical fields is, to

borrow a phrase used by Charles Shepherdson in a different but analogous context, “both impossible and necessary.”¹²

The first chapter of my dissertation undertakes a critical rereading of Neruda’s *Canto general*. I begin with Neruda not simply because he represents the canonical Latin American poet *par excellence* (his cultural influence, in other words, being impossible to overlook), but also because he represents a vision of community’s emergence in contrast to which the three figures that constitute the body of my investigation present original alternatives. As will be seen, Neruda’s community (of the subaltern, or “la innumerable y castigada / familia de los pobres del mundo” ‘the innumerable and punished / family of the world’s poor’ [*Canto* 148]), does not exclude catastrophic violence, but rather makes of it the condition of possibility for its existence and eventual emancipation. My reading highlights a negative catastrophe (the arrival of the “colonizer” on the continent), which inaugurates the history of social repression and ruptures the organic relation between landscape and the people; and a positive catastrophe (the subaltern revolution), which will redeem the weak and reinstate their “rightful” inheritance in a type of *dies irae* that Neruda deems “el día que esperan estos muertos,” “Un día de justicia” ‘The day awaited by the dead,’ ‘A day of justice’ (351, 352). Catastrophe thus acquires in the *Canto general* the weight and force of an event that produces a radical and exemplary alteration of social relations. It turns a harmonious before into a corrupted after, but also reverses the fallen now into a redeemed tomorrow. Within this framework, which operates simultaneously through a logic of sacrifice, necessary and obligatory violence,

¹² Shepherdson speaks of the traditionally antagonistic relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis and deconstruction, specifically between Lacan’s and Derrida’s followers. See “Derrida and Lacan.”

reparation, and commanding justice, the poet-prophet (“subject of redemption”) makes of death an operative condition by transfiguring it into the ground of a future resurrection of the subaltern community (“subject of the redeemed”).

Moving away from the Nerudian paradigm, my second chapter foregrounds Gabriela Mistral’s imagining of community as an infinite confrontation with its own fragility via a confrontation with Christ’s divine weakness. While her poetry situates itself within a Christian horizon, and while Christ functions as a center around which community coalesces, it conceptualizes the experience of the “passion” in such a way that it moves beyond the categories of redemption, resurrection, and closure. I begin by situating Mistral in relation to the main poetic tendencies of the early twentieth century in Latin America, mainly *modernismo*, and by contrasting the formal and thematic paucity of her poetry with the desired elaborateness of her precursors and contemporaries. I link the poetic “desolation” of Mistral’s work with her lifelong engagement and identification with those social groups who materially, economically, and socially “possessed nothing” or very little, groups who, in other words, found themselves abandoned in the social fringes of the national project. Unlike Neruda—who speaks on behalf of the same disenfranchised groups, but whose entire project is concerned with overcoming weakness, conquering death, avenging the historical wrongs, and turning defeat into triumph—Mistral makes of fragility a constitutive trait of her ideal, Christian community. I analyze several poems wherein the figure of Christ is presented as exemplary of fragility, pain, and desolation, and as the image around which, according to Mistral’s speakers, the community should be unified as it confronts and sustains the “defeat” embodied in the divine Other. I thus foreground

the characteristics of a community of the weak that is meant to *remain* weak, to the extent that if Mistral's poetry relays a pedagogic lesson, it is nothing but the "knowledge" or "instruction" of community's own perpetual dispossession and exposure.

Chapter three reads the model of community which the Chilean dictatorial imaginary proposes, contrasting it with the dissenting representation found in the poetic and artistic works of Eugenio Dittborn. I outline the range of visual, cultural, and propagandistic means by which the dictatorship promoted an idea of community as a clean and unpolluted body, as well as its attempts to eradicate the socio-political "residues" threatening its desired purity (Marxism's ideological remnants and the various claims to representation made by disenfranchised subjects and groups, to name two examples). I read, along with Willy Thayer, the military's spectacular coup d'état against Salvador Allende's regime as a catastrophic event that aims to produce, through real and iconographic force, a new political origin or foundation, and thus metaphorically to "cleanse" the landscape on which a new politically-docile community might be imagined. Through innovative uses of material waste—primarily motor-oil—Dittborn, on the contrary, insists on imagining community as always-already "stained"—by instantiations of State violence of which the 1973 coup is yet another example, and, as the title of a series of his *Airmail Paintings* indicate, by a disavowed "History of the Face": the presence of a subaltern collectivity whose nomadism disrupts the frame of the artistic work just as much as it disrupts the proper borders of the national community.

Moving on to the postdictatorial period, the fourth and final chapter of my

dissertation analyzes Raúl Zurita's "inoperative" vision of community as it must live with, and indeed suffer from, the knowledge of poetry's resurrectional incapacity. Contrary to the critical view that categorizes Zurita's work under a Nerudian paradigm of salvation, I argue that catastrophe, which here signals poetry's impossibility to rescue from death, ultimately prevents his work from claiming to redeem its object and thus from being easily recuperated by the socio-political discourses of reconciliation and national "healing." While the official rhetoric of democratic transition attempts to turn the victims of dictatorial violence into agents of national suture—in what amounts to their metaphoric resurrection—Zurita's poetry urges to keep the dead *as* dead, to grant the dead the death that seems constantly denied to them. Emerging as a kind of "false-prophet" for the community, the poet's word repeats Mistral's injunction to sustain defeat, to resist the temptation to turn loss (death) into profit (resurrection), thus replacing the satisfied vision of a paradise for the disappointed yet more ethical one of an *anteparadise*—the place prior to the site of redemption. I find this instantiation of community most perfectly yet poignantly materialized in Zurita's "earth poems." Through their physical erasure, the sky and earth poems issue a strong imperative for memory, serving as the fragile emblems for Zurita's imagined community—a community that experiences its simultaneous formation and dissolution at the moment when it remembers its dead *as* dead, that is, at the moment when it confronts, experiences, and shares out the pain of its own human catastrophe.

By situating poetic and artistic works within the conflictive context of Chilean culture and politics, I emphasize the imperative issued by these poets to confront

realities that are difficult yet necessary to bear, and which ultimately render community as a fragile configuration. Depending on the poet discussed, this “fragile imperative” may signify the willingness to sustain the other in his/her weakness (Mistral), the foregrounding of political violence against disenfranchised groups (Dittborn), or the sheer confrontation with human mortality and with art’s failure as a redemptive tool (Zurita). Throughout my analysis of these poets’ works, another name for fragility emerges: catastrophe. But catastrophe understood (as I suggested above) as an enduring condition rather than as a singular event. Catastrophe in its quietest approach, advance, or deployment; a tremble rather than an eruption; a coming rather than an arrival: a catastrophe that makes no noise, that neither ruptures nor wounds in a single blow, but that is nonetheless infinitely effective and affecting.

CHAPTER 1

Conquest, Revolution, Retribution: The Catastrophic Foundations of Community in Pablo Neruda's *Canto general*

As is well known, *Canto general* represents a major shift in Pablo Neruda's poetic trajectory, which may be roughly outlined as a move from personal, existential anguish (represented perhaps most acutely by his *Residencia en la tierra* [1935], but already foreseen in the earlier *Tentativa del hombre infinito* [1925]) to a concern with community's formation and emancipation. From the project-less nomadism of the solitary subject, Neruda shifts to the idea of a future-oriented community that moves towards the realm of universal equality and justice—all the while denouncing, on behalf of those who endure it, a past and present time of injustice (mainly at the hands of either Spanish or North American imperialism).¹³

Typically, the political concept which enables the possibility of emancipation, equality, and justice (to mention only a handful of the positive outcomes envisioned by the *Canto general*) is that of “revolution.” M. H. Abrams recounts a “visionary” poetic tradition that goes at least as far back as Western romanticism, and which has been particularly receptive to the transformative capacity of revolution. At the height of its confidence in the concept, Romantic poetry referred to poetic intellect—itsself visionary and prophetic—as a force harboring the capacity to amend humanity's

¹³ “The poetic voice speaks on behalf of the poor and of the wretched, on behalf of all oppressed groups of the continent; it speaks against all brutal forms of conquest, empire, and imperialism, from ancient to contemporary times: Incan, Spanish, British, and Yankee imperialism—all of these constitute brutal systems of oppression and exploitation, and all of them are denounced” (Predmore 87). Neruda's previous un-engagement is most evident in the way he wrote about the past in his later autobiographies, where he did not seem troubled by the colonialism in Southeast Asia, which he knew first-hand in the years spent in Burma.

rupture with both itself and the world. Thus, “The vision is [for Romanticism] that of the awesome depths and height of the human mind, and of the power of that mind as in itself adequate [to consummate] a holy marriage with the external universe, to create out of the world of all of us, in a quotidian and recurrent miracle, a new world which is the equivalent of paradise” (28).¹⁴ This vision would later be complemented or “amended” by the Marxist idea that unification would take place *in* the world and through humanity’s direct intervention rather than *outside* of it and through the intervention of a transcendent force: “the restored paradise of the Apocalypse will not be a location outside this world to which we will be transferred after death; it will be this world itself, as experienced by our redeemed and glorified senses in our earthly existence” (53).

Pablo Neruda’s interest in both political revolutions and in poetry’s insurrectional aptitude is heir to this literary engagement with the concept of revolution;¹⁵ yet it is also linked to a politically-volatile Hispanic context, within

¹⁴ I cannot help but cite Abrams’s extremely clear summary of the ostensive stages of a “total revolution” as perceived by the Romantic tradition: “But peculiarly Western, and relatively recent, are the doctrine and trial of a total revolution, which is conceived to possess many, or all of these attributes: (1) the revolution will, by an inescapable and cleansing explosion of violence and destruction, reconstitute the existing political, social, and moral order absolutely, from its very foundations, and so (2) bring about abruptly, or in a remarkably short time, the shift from the present era of profound evil, suffering, and disorder to an era of peace, justice, and optimal conditions for general happiness; (3) it will be led by a militant elite, who will find ranged against them the forces dedicated to preserving the present evil, consolidated in a specific institution or class or race; (4) it will originate in a particular and critical time and place, it will by irresistible contagion spread everywhere to include all mankind; (5) its benefits will endure for a very long time, perhaps forever, because the transformation of the institutional circumstances and cultural ambiance of man will heal the intellectual and spiritual malaise which has brought him to his present plight; and (6) it is inevitable, because it is guaranteed either by a transcendent or by an immanent something, not ourselves, which makes for the ineluctable triumph of total justice, community, and happiness on earth” (63).

¹⁵ Predmore summarizes the entrance into the Spanish American field of this revolutionary-, apocalyptically-inspired genealogy: “This, then, is the tradition inspired by the biblical Apocalypse and that is transformed into individual spiritual drama, which has its roots in thinkers and poets from English Romanticism, but which harks back to certain interpretive traditions undertaken by radical Protestants in the seventeenth century. This tradition passes through the visionary poetry of the great

which the Spanish Civil War (1936-39)¹⁶ possibly stands as the most significant event.¹⁷ Neruda's shift, in other words, answers to and is symptomatic of a general shift taking place partly in response to a Hispanic historical landscape permeated by revolution (either as an actual event or as a political concept), and which, according to Luis Cárcamo-Huechante and José Antonio Mazzotti, expressed a general faith in poetry's transformative power. *Canto general's* date of publication (1950) would then situate Neruda's book (and his role as a cultural figure) at the vanguard of this "awakening":

This referential frame of political and social utopias—popular during the [19]50s, 60s, and early 70s—made possible [the emergence of] an (authoritarian) faith in the transcendent and exemplary character of both a political and poetic subject. A correspondence was thus forged between poetic and utopian discourses: poetry and politics merged symbolically in the horizon of worlds dreamed and liberated. Not surprisingly, a narrative-colloquial language became privileged amongst the majority of organic poets from the continental left. Let us also not forget that this faith in the transcendent character of poetry and in the poet as a public figure attained its most powerful expression in the Pablo Neruda's last poetic cycle (1950 to 1973). From the *Canto general* (1950) to *Maremoto* (1971) a redemptive, boundless—that is, utopian—confidence in poetic voice and representation becomes expressed. (Cárcamo-Huechante and Mazzotti 10)

Additionally, *Canto general* may be said to belong to a genealogy of nation-building poetry (going as far back as the independence movements of the early 19th

symbolist French poets, culminating in the deep psychic exploration of French surrealism. This tradition arrives to the twentieth century and influences the great poetry of *Residencia en la tierra* and *Canto general*, by Pablo Neruda" (80-81). For a beautifully argued (and illustrated) book on revolution and its relation to an apocalyptic political tradition, see Bartra.

¹⁶ During the Spanish Civil War, poets took sides with either Stalinist or Trotskyist parties/platforms as the two main forms of revolutionary Marxism. Although Neruda was not yet the revolutionary poet he'd become later on, he didn't condemn the Stalinists' slaughtering of Trotskyist activists and intellectuals, one of several reasons why he and Paz severed their relationship.

¹⁷ Neruda's experience in the Spanish Civil War provided the inspiration for "España en el corazón," a poem included in *Tercera residencia 1935-1945* (41-70), along with the more vocally pro-Stalinist "Canto a Stalingrado" and "Nuevo canto de amor a Stalingrado" (73-76, 77-81).

century), which, in the interest of forging national communities, was by nature concerned with either imagining a foundational origin or performing/constructing that very origin through its discursive universe.¹⁸ The difference would be that *Canto general* does not restrict itself to a national agenda, but rather conceives of itself as a continental enterprise. More accurately, Spanish American romanticism, which was contemporaneous with the independence movements of the time, was interested in the notion of the *homeland* (*patria*) as opposed to the more administrative one of *nation* (although in reality the two concepts were very much intertwined, inasmuch as romanticism [both European and Spanish American] is a poetics that is also a politics, and a politics that is simultaneously a poetics)¹⁹: “Spanish American romantic poets referred to the nation in terms of ‘homeland’ . . . Nation and State are juridical concepts: they designate an order founded upon the legality of a symbolic system; homeland, on the other hand, appeals to the imagination and to emotion [sensibilidad]: it designates a unity founded on a complex patriarchal imaginary and on a sense of non-legal duty” (Barreda and Béjar 25).

As an element within this poetic drive to forge “homelands,” writers accorded an important function to the figure of the ruin, inasmuch as its ambiguous temporality enabled the establishment of a link between past and present. In Michael J. Lazzara and Vicky Unruh’s summary:

¹⁸ Pedro Barreda and Eduardo Béjar highlight the political significance of constructing a foundational myth through poetry—an operation by which the lettered class organized the social space according to its own principles and interests: “The slogan of Spanish American poets was primarily that of literary nationalization; nonetheless, if theoretically this was understood as the direct expression of the Nation’s character and of its collective, political, and social aspirations, in practice this was rehearsed as a discursive practice that generated, selectively and strategically, the Nation’s identity and ‘essential’ traits as a verbal space and devised a hierarchy of values” (15).

¹⁹ For a discussion of the link between romanticism and politics in Europe see Picard.

In Latin America, an appropriative recycling of pre-Columbian physical or cultural ruins weaves through nineteenth-century nation-building projects and is seen in such diverse works as Cuban José de Heredia's [sic] meditative poem "*En el teocalli de Cholula*" (1820), which contemplates Aztec ruins in a Romantic reflection on the past; the long poem, *La Victoria de Junín: canto a Bolívar* (1825), by Ecuador's José Joaquín Olmedo, that celebrates a heroic Latin America founded not only on Bolívar's achievements but also on the spirit of the Inca leader, Huayna Capac; or Manuel de Jesús Galván's 1882 novel *Enriquillo* that resuscitates an obliterated indigenous past to create, in the aftermath of Haitian independence, a national romance that erases a substantial Afro-Caribbean presence from the Dominican Republic's cultural map. (Introduction 2)

In this vein, the poet José María Heredia (1803-1839) is perhaps the most important of Neruda's precursors, insofar as his main concern is to construct the image of a "homeland" (in opposition to the Spanish-imposed administrative configuration), and of doing so through the aid of a strong, visionary subject.²⁰ Additionally, the figure of the ruin appears in Heredia's poetry as a site of contemplation, revelation, and connection with the past. I am of course thinking, with Lazarra and Unruh, of "En el teocalli de Cholula," a poem in which the speaker situates himself in the ruins of an Aztec pyramid (*teocalli*) and therein, in the simultaneous evocation of the beauty and brutality of the former empire, finds a parallel with and a didactic lesson for the Latin American independence struggles:

Hallábame sentado en la famosa
Choluteca pirámide. Tendido
El llano inmenso que ante mí yacía,
Los ojos a espaciarse convidaba.
¡Qué silencio! ¡Qué paz! ¡Oh! ¿quién diría
Que en estos bellos campos reina alzaba
La bárbara opresión, y que esta tierra

²⁰ Santí, following Juan Larrea and Cedomil Goic, also mentions the probable influence of Darío's 1907 poem "Visión," "an overtly Dantean poem that describes the symbolist poet's ascent to a realm of pure poetry. If this is correct, Neruda's poem would nonetheless attempt to "revise" Darío's text, which "eschews all geographical reference for a world of pure poetry in which the *Paradiso* represents the symbolist ideal of nonrepresentation" (*Pablo Neruda* 152).

Brota mieses tan ricas, abonada
Con sangre de hombres, en que fue inundada
Por la superstición y por la guerra? . . .

I found myself on the famous
Cholulca pyramid. Extended
before me the immense prairie
Invited my gaze to spread out.
Such silence! Such peace! Oh! Who would have thought
That on these beautiful fields oppression
Rose royally, that this earth which gives such rich grain,
Fertilized with men's blood, was permeated
By superstition and war? . . . (Heredia 59)

While Neruda's speaker, like Heredia's, criticizes the oppressive nature of the pre-Columbian empires (which were in many respects just as oppressive as the Spanish colonial project), his attitude is not as critical or cynical, nor does he deal with the pretensions to immortality that these civilizations may have held.²¹ Although the content of revelation is not the same, both Heredia's and Neruda's speakers obtain their respective epiphanies through an encounter with the ruins' seemingly pathetic and mute perseverance. Likewise, Neruda will, throughout the *Canto general*, deploy a topos already utilized in Heredia's poem: the fertilization of the land through the people's blood. Thus, in the opening poem of Section IV of Neruda's poem, "Los libertadores," the American "tree" is nourished not with water, but with the blood of the dead:

Aquí viene el árbol, el árbol
nutrido por muertos desnudos
...
Aquí viene el árbol, el árbol
cuyas raíces están vivas,
sacó el salitre del martirio,
sus raíces comieron sangre

²¹ Messenger Cypess reads both "El teocalli de Cholula" and Shelley's "Ozymandias" as employing the "ruins motif to mock previous generations and their pretensions to grandeur and immortality" (165).

y extrajo lágrimas del suelo:
las elevó por sus ramajes,
las repartió en su arquitectura.

Here comes the tree, the tree
nourished by the naked dead

...

Here comes the tree, the tree
whose roots are alive,
it wrenched the salt out of martyrdom,
its roots ate blood,
it dug out tears from the soil:
it raised them up through its branches,
shared them out in its architecture. (*Canto* 185)

The process of “fertilization” in “El teocalli” does not emblemize the promise of a grand, political movement—as it does in the *Canto general*—but rather points to the irony of the beautiful land’s having been the site of a former system of barbaric violence and oppression. Although bodies and resources are endlessly consumed by Spanish conquistadors, greedy colonizers, and American corporations, in the *Canto general* the cosmically incommensurable forces of telluric reproduction are always on the side of “nature” (the indigenous) and against European “culture” (instrumental reason). This illusion of complete natural self-replenishment happens first; its transformation into an opportunity for rebellion, self-affirmation, and self-vindication comes later. Unlike Neruda’s, Heredia’s speaker seems not to believe in the redemptive power of memory (“Fueron: de ellos no resta ni memoria” ‘They were: no memory remains of them’ [60]),²² while at the same time emphasizing time’s absolute destructive power, which nothing is able to withstand (“Todo perece / Por ley universal” ‘Everything perishes / By universal law’). The topos of fertilization will

²² This critique of memory is of course challenged by the speaker’s own utterance. The affirmation that “no memory remains of them” is contradicted by the fact that the speaker himself remembers “them,” albeit only to criticize their hubris and barbarism.

attain a much more forceful political significance in Neruda's poem, where the tripartite process of death, fertilization, and renewal will stand as the natural analogue for the political process of American liberation. Likewise, while Heredia's speaker expresses the reality of absolute oblivion from memory, as well as a belief in the absolute perishableness of things, Neruda's speaker is forced to hold on to the belief in a non-perishable cultural and human residue, a remainder which it is his task to retain in memory for the benefit of a collective archive. This rescuing from mnemonic and temporal oblivion is, within the general economy of the *Canto general*, a revolutionary act.

History as Catastrophe

With the *Canto general*'s interest in forging a voice that expresses a collective desire for revolution, Neruda may be said to depart from the vision articulated almost a century earlier by Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855, first edition)—departing both in the sense of *starting out* and *deviating from*, of paraphrasing and inventing an original and originary word. *Canto general*, in other words, seeks to be not so much the “Song of Myself,” but the “Song of Ourselves,” the chant through which the general or universal community of the marginalized hears and reiterates its communion with itself.²³ This general song, as the hymn that unites and reinforces

²³ Granted, Whitman's “Song of Myself” (and *Leaves of Grass* as a whole) is a poem about community, as its first stanza clearly, though perhaps deceptively, signals: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (49). The implication here is that both speaker and reader partake in an essence or substance that disposes them to be always in agreement. This agreement would be not only ideological but physical or “atomic.” To assume the other's viewpoint, for Whitman, designates this sharing; the confident assertion that the reader will *assume* the speaker's words and beliefs merely repeats the fact that they already *share* the same words and beliefs.

community's identity, extending itself both toward an immemorial past and an unstoppable future, would also be the call that welcomes the dispossessed other, precisely he or she who has no community; the general song unites the community while opening it up to the outsider, to the foreigner, to the "rejected ones," to the oppressed people of the American continent. The general song is, furthermore, both tragic and jubilatory; a song that describes incredible pain but that also foretells a collective resurrection of the social body. American²⁴ history, in Neruda's saga, is seen as a cosmic, mythical drama wherein protagonists' actions have incredible force and consequences: nothing less than the alteration of history and of social structures. If the unfolding of American history, according to the *Canto general*, is characterized by the catastrophe of the European subject's arrival and by the chain of violent events that this arrival sets in motion, the closure of this history will be accompanied by a no-less-forceful catastrophe—one which, this time, will benefit the subaltern part while making its negative consequences felt on the subjugating groups.

The *Canto general*'s logic may be summarized as follows: the greater the suffering endured, the more magnificent the redemption. This is where the Biblical tradition of Christian martyrdom (from the Apocalypse to Augustine's *De civitate Dei*) connects with the interpretive powers of that brand of dialectical materialism in which only massive oppression can create the objective conditions for the unstoppable rising of the oppressed masses. "Descubridores de Chile" imagines this narrative in a rather forcefully-abject way, with the vital nugget of popular resistance literally born

²⁴ Here and throughout I will follow Neruda's use of the terms *América* and *americano/a*, which designate Latin America and Latin American, respectively. Neruda's "other" America will be referred to as *The United States* or *North America*.

out of the feces of the Spanish imperial eagle:

El español sentado junto a la rosa un día,
junto al aceite, junto al vino, junto al antiguo cielo
no imaginó este punto de colérica piedra
nacer bajo el estiércol del águila marina.

The Spaniard seated besides the day's rose,
besides the oil, besides the wine, besides the ancient sky
did not envision this point of furious stone
born under the oceanic eagle's dung. (*Canto* 169)

This same logic is exemplified in a more sustained manner in Neruda's use of the ruins motif in the book's second section, the famous "Alturas de Macchu Picchu," where the ancient site serves as the chosen place for communal resurrection. That Neruda's text locates the foundation of his vital utopia on an ostensibly dead ruin may seem paradoxical, especially when we consider that traditionally ruins have served to highlight the opposite: the failure of utopian projects.²⁵ But this choice is perfectly consistent with Neruda's conceptualization of resurrection, which, to repeat, conceives of the risen body as all the more glorious when destruction and death prove all the more violent and total. While destruction may be said to constitute the first movement in this economy of resurrection, a second movement would act upon the destroyed yet resilient object and provide the force for its new ascent. In a certain sense, resurrection reproduces here a traditional dialectical progression, incorporating destruction as an integral part of the sublating operation. The dialectic, we remember, does not discard the negation, but rather incorporates it into what will become a new positivity. Likewise, the architectural fragment embodied by Machu Picchu (the negation) is an element integral to and operative with respect to the economy of a

²⁵ According to Enrico Mario Santí, "unlike other ruins, which normally remind one of death, these [Machu Picchu] are able to engender life . . ." (*Pablo Neruda* 119).

future continental redemption as imagined by the *Canto general*, and for this reason assumes a pivotal place and function within its overarching vision.

This reference to dialectics and to Hegel may be further expanded to include the concept of tragedy as understood by German romanticism, inasmuch as its understanding of the tragic is more or less synonymous with what I perceive as the *Canto general*'s understanding of the catastrophic. In *The Catastrophe of Modernity*, Patrick Dove analyses the importance of tragedy within German romanticism's thinking of national and state foundations, particularly in the idealist tradition represented by Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling.²⁶ Dove recounts that, in Hegel's mind, "tragedy stages a violent encounter [*polemos*] between two conflicting forces or 'worlds' . . . each of whose internal logic precisely negates or excludes the claims of the other" (31). The clash or "encounter" between the two forces represents the "unreflective moment" of the dialectic, a moment that is expected to be superseded by a second movement of "reconciliation," which would produce a "third term that would incorporate fundamental aspects of both particulars: for instance, the democratic state [if the original opposing forces were, for example, "barbarism" and "the Enlightenment"]". Without getting into the particulars of how tragedy as a genre functioned in relation to German national unification (which Dove does), I simply

²⁶ "For late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Germany, this interest in classical tragedy coincides with a search for a cultural form that would be adequate to the task of representing or constituting . . . a new sense of national unity, in a social arena that had previously seen itself as nothing more than an array of autonomous and potentially-conflicting states devoid of a single organizing principle. In the liminal context of German unification, the turn to tragedy can be understood within a broader attempt to present national culture as the self-defining work of a people (*Volk*) . . . Tragedy, which since its emergence at the origin of Athenian democracy has always embodied the sense of a foundational work, provides an important aesthetic or identificatory mechanism through which the modern state will justify its tutelary and disciplinary functions, i.e. as mediator through which a people realizes itself as such. Tragedy exemplifies an 'aesthetic promise' that underwrites the formation of the modern nation-state" (Dove 13).

wish to highlight the evental (i.e. catastrophic) character that history, for these thinkers as for Neruda much later, acquired when interpreted from the viewpoint of tragedy. In Dove's words,

Hegel's turn to tragedy seeks an exemplary and foundational form; tragedy's radiant image is charged with providing the symbolic basis for a transition from the 'heroic times' of the old gods and their factional conflicts to the institution of what Hegel calls the 'universal ethical forces' of the modern state. Tragedy exposes history as 'absolute catastrophe,' and in so doing it invites us to think of history as event, as a rupture that radically transforms the terms and possibilities of history. The tragedy of history, then, describes a double movement: catastrophe, a complete (*kata*) destruction and overturning (*strophē*) of the old, is also an opening onto a new beginning. (32)

Canto general also conceives of history as "absolute catastrophe," as "event."

More specifically, the Spanish Conquest and the future Revolution would name those instances of catastrophe. Whether catastrophe is positive or negative, a good thing or a bad thing, depends quite simply on which side (oppressor or oppressed) one is speaking from. From the perspective of the subaltern (and that of their spokesperson, the poet), the Conquest is the prototype of the negative catastrophe while the Revolution exemplifies the positive one. What is important to highlight is that both events share a structural analogy and that they unfold in a similar fashion, albeit with radically different consequences.

Before moving on, I feel the necessity to voice a personal conviction: *Canto general*, to my mind, genuinely and commendably denounces the violent atrocities and social injustices suffered by the "voiceless" people of the continent, atrocities and injustices silenced, for the most part, by the "official" and didactic view that regards the American "discovery" as essentially good. To this partial version, Neruda's text provides an alternative history that foregrounds the violence of the colonial project

and the resistance against it on the part of various collective and individual protagonists, promoting, through the iconization of these resistances, a powerful sense of solidarity that may effectively change what Neruda perceives as the oppressive social structures of his time (and which, perhaps through different disguises, are still very much present in *our* time). The aim of my project is not to put in doubt the “sincerity and authenticity” (to use Lionel Trilling’s phrase) of Neruda’s project. However one may define “great” and “beautiful,” *Canto general* is, in my opinion, a great achievement in Latin American and World literature and, quite often, a beautiful and moving lyric. I also understand that resurrection and redemption as such do not ever take place; that the *Canto general* neither narrates the catastrophe that will emancipate the oppressed collectivities of the continent nor present or describe—in minute detail or in general strokes—the glorious, risen body of the future collectivity (perhaps because the radically novel nature of the catastrophe and of the risen body are impossible to apprehend by means of our linguistic limitedness; perhaps because the catastrophe is, in other words, the *unrepresentable* as such). As W. H. Auden once famously said, “poetry makes nothing happen,” a phrase that in this context may be taken to mean that poetry does not actually make old bodies new nor turn death into life. Enrico Mario Santí recognizes this “irony” or “failure” in Neruda’s poem, pointing out that “Despite many passages that announce a coming day of judgment, such as the end of *Alturas* or even section IV of *Que despierte el leñador*, none of these intimations amounts to the cosmic drama that is required for apocalypse. We become increasingly aware of this disparity as we approach the end of the book, because apocalypse is the one expectation that remains unfulfilled by the otherwise

consistently scriptural tone” (203).²⁷ While it is true that catastrophe (or apocalypse) and its aftermath never actually take place within the temporal and spatial domains of the text, the entire purpose of the poem is to render these events both *desirable* and *imaginable*, whereas the poets whose works will be treated in the following chapters attempt neither of these things, or at the very least go about it in radically different ways: whereas Neruda envisions the future idea of resurrection but suspends its representation or actualization, I would say (and anticipate my upcoming readings) that Mistral’s poetry does not envision resurrection in the first place (neither Christ’s nor humanity’s) and that Zurita’s poetry envisions resurrection—and in fact does so in the *present moment*—but then immediately denies that it ever took place.²⁸

My reflections thus intend to foreground the ways in which the *Canto general*—while incarnating a powerful and convincing critique of colonialism and Eurocentrism in general—puts forth a problematic (because catastrophic) narrativization of history and of community. Furthermore, community in the *Canto general* is to my mind problematic because its emergence requires the implementation and distribution of a certain kind of violence (in the name, of course, of justice and retribution); because, in other words, it seeks to amend violence *with* violence, to overturn the effects of the previous catastrophe (the Conquest) through the force of another—more powerful, more shattering—catastrophe (Revolution), thereby only reversing or overturning the roles of oppressor and oppressed. *Canto general* thus

²⁷ Santí suggests that Neruda’s subsequent work (particularly *Fin de mundo* [1969], *La espada encendida* [1970], and *2000* [1974]) represent attempts to mend this “failure,” that is, to give an actual representation of the apocalypse missing in the *Canto general*. See Santí 206-36.

²⁸ The chapter I dedicate to Eugenio Dittborn’s work will not deal with the notion of resurrection; I would therefore be hesitant to describe his work’s position on this respect.

arguably advocates a view of history and of social struggle that is essentially sacrificial, in the sense that it obliges us to think of history in terms of victims and victimizers, of lives that are offered on behalf of a certain cause and of a cause on behalf of which these lives would be spent. Indeed, *Canto general* may be doing precisely this: endorsing, on behalf of a revolutionary event that is simultaneously a present fantasy and a future truth, the demand for mythic violence (in the sense described by Benjamin, which I will turn to briefly). Neruda's "no es sueño mi sueño sino tierra" 'my dream is no dream but earth' (*Canto* 378),²⁹ a verse the essence of which may be said to traverse the entire text, indexes this certainty and this demand: when the catastrophe comes, it will come down with the weight of the earth; and after it accomplishes its work, the earth and the community will have regained their former unity.

In his analysis of the tragic within the evolution of the Spanish American concept of "nation," Dove pauses on the poetry of César Vallejo, which has been commonly described as infused by a tragic sense. One of his remarks in this regard perfectly describes the simultaneously messianic and catastrophic import of Neruda's text, and so I would like to cite it extensively:

Messianic narratives often begin by making reference to the arrival of the Spanish *conquistadors* and the institution of the colonial regime, associating these events with the death or flight of the gods that ruled over the pre-Columbian worlds. In a number of cases, the advent of the colonial regime is registered as a catastrophic collapse of time itself, and as inaugurating a timeless time of mute suffering. But the use of messianic narratives to

²⁹ Neruda complements this assertion with the following: "América, no de noche / ni de luz están hechas las sílabas que canto. / De tierra es la materia apoderada / del fulgor y del pan de mi victoria," 'América, the syllables / I sing are made with neither light nor dark. / Of earth is the substance that governs the glow and bread of my victory'; "Y no es vino el que bebo sino tierra" 'And it is not wine that I drink but earth' (378).

symbolize the apocalyptic rupture brought about by colonialism is mirrored by a parallel intent, which seeks in messianism the symbolic instruments needed to invoke and awaken a newly constituted indigenous political subject. (208)

Perhaps the principal difference between Dove's summary and Neruda's vision would be that the latter's subject is not strictly "indigenous," but encompasses any racial and social groups generally regarded as oppressed. It is no surprise then that *Canto general*, in addition to being labeled as "messianic" and "visionary," has been commonly described as a "monumental" work, a word that would define the text at both the level of form and of subject matter: depending on the edition, the text extends over five hundred pages, while temporally it spans roughly five hundred years of American history (discounting the first section, "La lámpara en la tierra," which describes a prehistoric time prior to the tragic advent of culture and civilization). Monumental would be the overall ambitions that traverse the text: a poetic recounting of the continent's history, which includes the Spanish conquest, the struggles for national independence, and, more recently, the struggle against North American and European hegemony; the rewriting of history from a perspective partial to the oppressed peoples of the region (native inhabitants, the working classes, the proletariat, etc.); and an "encyclopedic" cataloguing of the region's geographic diversity on the part of the visionary poet, whose gaze extends from Oregon to Tierra del Fuego. It is no surprise, then, to see *Canto general* situated alongside other "totalizing" texts, including the *Popol Vuh*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Victor Hugo's *La légende des siècles*, Ercilla's *La Araucana*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*,³⁰ and Pound's

³⁰ In a speech given at the New York PEN Club in 1971 (included in *Para nacer he nacido*), Neruda describes Whitman's work in terms that may just as well describe his *Canto general*: "... he was a torrential and didactic singer. These two qualities would appear antagonistic. They seem to describe

Cantos (Santí, Introducción 13).

Monumental narratives of this kind are inherently alluring. In the case of the *Canto general*, this allure is related to the fact that it attempts to “fill in” various conceptual, and perhaps even political, vacuums: to the lack of a historical project it provides a collective goal toward which cultural and artistic energies may be funneled, and which is nothing less than the emancipation of the American community, particularly that of its marginalized groups; to geographic and political fragmentation it provides a vision of continental union that is meant, in turn, to counter the North American and European threats of cultural and military invasion; against artistic and poetic disengagement it gives a view of art and of poetry as promoters of collective solidarity and enactors of social change; to the disillusion of ubiquitous and real injustice it gives us tyrants and victims—tyrants who will become the victims of a future, universal judgment, and victims whose very oppression turns them into current heroes and future emancipators. Referencing Neruda’s work, Michael Predmore explains this as a shift from ambiguity to clarity of purpose:

The sense of an incomprehensible, nightmarish, and catastrophic world overwhelming the poet-witness in *Residencia* is replaced in *Canto general* by a

the *caudillo* rather than the writer . . . He is the first totalitarian poet, and his intention is not only to sing but to impose his extensive vision of how men and nations relate to each other” (419-20). If, as Neruda suggests, we “[s]till live in a Whitmanesque era,” just as true may be the assertion that we still live in a Nerudian era. Although I do not have the space to develop a lengthier reading, I would suggest at least that Neruda’s speech deserves further analysis, paying particular attention to the poetic and political implications of “debt.” Throughout this piece, and evoking Coleridge’s famous image of the albatross hanging on the ancient mariner’s neck, Neruda emphasizes his debt to Whitman as a poetic precursor while also speaking of the economic debt (“la deuda externa”) owed to the First World on the part of Latin American nations. Regarding Alonso de Ercilla, Neruda describes *La Araucana* in terms that are also applicable to the *Canto general*: “In *La Araucana* we see not only the epic history of men caught in a mortal struggle, not only the courage and agony of our forefathers as they were caught in their common extermination, but also a vital cataloguing of our floral and natural patrimony. Plants and fowl, birds and bodies of water, customs and ceremonies, languages and wigs, arrows and fragrances, snows and tides that belong to us—all of this acquired a name, at last, in *La Araucana*, it began to live by virtue of the verb” (*Para nacer* 393-94).

clear millenarian purpose . . . the frightened and tormented apocalyptic sentiment (godless and without redemption), expressed throughout *Residencia en la tierra* is transformed in *Canto general* into the strong, revolutionary conviction that justice will be attained through the people's struggle here on earth, the ultimate goal at the end of this brutal stage of human history. (88)

If we attend to Neruda's own thoughts on the *Canto general*, it is clear that he understood his project in precisely these terms: as a text that affirms the cultural originality and social unity of *América* vis-à-vis foreign cultural models, and, perhaps more importantly, as a call for collective, revolutionary action. Neruda, furthermore, sees the poetic task as an archeological one, employing throughout metaphors of excavation, unearthing, and digging. Prior to the poetic intervention, to the poet's excavating gesture, the continent is in essence formless. It has no name and hence it has no form. The poetic act creates a centripetal force that unifies the material confusion of the land into a meaningful totality. As a result of this process, *América* emerges in both name and reality, incorporating the human community within its semantic coherence and teleology. As the arena wherein historical dramas take place, the "post-natural" land (the named land, the land that has entered into history) surfaces as a powerful protagonist within the narrative reconstructed by the text—at times passive (as when it receives the penetrative hand of the poet) and at times more active (as when out of its depths the revolutionary subject arises, like a tree or flower). "To unite our continent, to discover, construct, recover it, that was my purpose," "a *Canto general* that had the purpose of building [*arquitecturar*] a poem for our entire *América*" (qtd. in Santí, Introducción 19, 17). In these words, Neruda expresses the desire to construct a new "household," which would rise out of the ashes and dirt of the demolished one. The residual matter—what was left over from the devastation,

what survived death and is therefore still very much alive—will function as the foundation of this new, American edifice.³¹

Poetry performs a double movement or gesture: an archeological one, which is essentially concerned with the past, with amending the historical record and unearthing the forgotten residues of culture; and a messianic one, which turns toward the future and is concerned with preparing the conditions for a coming utopia and with the metaphoric erection of a new American edifice. Thus, while Neruda claims that “[t]he obscurest events of our peoples [*pueblos*] must be brought to light” (qtd. in Santí, Introducción 19), he adds that it is equally important to make these events, these otherwise inert “hechos,” usable for the future and for the current revolutionary endeavor that prepares that future. Archive and utopia, preservation and preparation: the demand for memory includes the demand to make memory operative, indeed to release memory from its claim to being an absolute law because it is based on a record kept by the victors and naturalized as memory. Neruda summarizes this imperative in saying that “[w]e are the chroniclers of a retarded birth [*nacimiento retardado*] . . . Yet it is not only a matter of preserving our culture, but of offering it all our strength, of nourishing and making it blossom” (qtd. in Santí, Introducción 19). Poetry, in other words, should not conform itself with chronicling the past, with preserving it in books, but should also lend its work to the future, tilling the ground for a new “blossoming.” The preservation of the archive should be accompanied by the forging of a new archive—for an archive that is pure archive (nothing but contemplative, melancholic remembrance) will do little to assuage the plight of the dispossessed. The archive

³¹ Once again, the term *American* here excludes the United States, and refers exclusively to those portions of the American continent which historically underwent Spanish conquest and political control.

must be turned into praxis, into action. It is not simply a question of remembering, but of making memory itself useful; not simply a question of mourning the dead, but of making the dead themselves useful.

Neruda recounts that in a moment of revelation (one of the many he experienced during his 1943 visit to Machu Picchu, and which dictated the content and form of his text), he came to the following realization: “I understood that if we treaded upon the same soil we shared a link with those great enterprises of the American community, that we could not ignore them, that either our lack of knowledge or our silence represented not only a crime, but the *prolongation of defeat* [*la continuación de una derrota*]” (qtd. in Santí Introducción 21; emphasis added). For Neruda, the concern will be precisely to move the continent and its people beyond the stagnation and inactivity of defeat, a move that requires, as stated above, not only an archeological search that reestablishes the community’s link with its past, but the construction and promotion of a collective program or project that sees its ultimate consummation in the future. Only then can the “continuation of defeat” be itself defeated, inaugurating in its place an alternate history nourished by rebirth, vitality, and futurity. The subject of this new history would be willing and able to move beyond the unproductiveness and sterility of pure recollection, capable of resignifying memory and loss as useful concepts or tools. Simply put, this would be a subject whose capacity to either experience (the community) or give (the poet) “new life” signifies the defeat of defeat itself (i.e. the defeat of death itself).

Importantly, the revelatory moment takes places amidst the ruins of Machu Picchu, both in Neruda’s experience and within the general narrative of the *Canto*

general.³² The second out of fifteen parts, “Alturas de Macchu Picchu” is generally regarded as the central section of Neruda’s book,³³ for it is here that the encounter between creative subjectivity and historical archive, between speaking and non-speaking subject (the poetic and the oppressed subjects, respectively) takes place. Just as on an experiential or subjective level the Incan ruins function as the privileged site wherein the poetic epiphany occurs, on a textual level “Alturas de Macchu Picchu” functions, aleph-like, as the “site” wherein the *Canto general*’s overarching vision may be apprehended by the reader. In spite of their purported muteness, the ruins eloquently speak on behalf of a former culture and of a former subject; the poet, in

³² In this respect, both poet and poem repeat the quintessentially Romantic narrative of the poet journeying to a mountaintop and therein attaining an epiphany. Among the most famous of these is Wordsworth’s experience, which he would subsequently narrate in *The Prelude*. M.H. Abrams provides a good description of this incident: “The occasion is the ascent of Mount Snowdon, which Wordsworth, in accordance with his controlling idea, excerpts from its chronological position in his life in 1791, before the crucial experience of France, and describes in the concluding book of *The Prelude*. As he breaks through the cover of clouds the light of the moon ‘upon the turf / Fell like a flash,’ and he sees the total scene as ‘the perfect image of a mighty Mind’ in its free and continuously creative reciprocation with its milieu, ‘Willing to work and to be wrought upon’ and so to ‘create / A like existence’ (XIII, 36-119). What has been revealed to Wordsworth in this symbolic landscape is the grand locus of *The Recluse* which he announced in the Prospectus, ‘The Mind of Man— / My haunt, and the main region of my song,’ as well as the ‘high argument’ of that poem, the union between mind and the external world and the resulting ‘creation . . . which they with blended might / Accomplish’ (*Natural* 78-79). The parallel between Wordsworth’s and Neruda’s experiences is almost uncanny: just as Mount Snowdon reveals to Wordsworth the project of *The Recluse* (which he never completed), Machu Picchu reveals to Neruda the true direction that his poem would take, and which required the abandonment of his original *Canto general de Chile* in favor of a more comprehensive *Canto general*: “There [in Machu Picchu] began to germinate my idea of a general song of *América*. Earlier, the idea of a general song of Chile had persisted in me, in the manner of a chronicle. That visit changed my perspective. From then on I saw the whole of *América* from the heights of Macchu Picchu [sic]. This was the title of the first poem written with my new perception” (qtd. in Santí, Introducción 21). One should bear in mind, however, that these parallels are merely experiential; politically, Wordsworth’s and Neruda’s poems would be far from each other (while the *Canto general* promotes revolutionary conversion, *The Prelude* may be said to constitute an apology for de-conversion from revolutionary politics after Wordsworth’s disenchantment with the Reign of Terror and its aftermath). Other poems from the English romantic canon that could be read alongside Neruda’s journey as described in “Alturas” are Shelley’s “Mont Blanc” and *Prometheus Unbound*, which has been in fact connected to the myth of Quetzalcóatl by Mexican anthropologists and (more frequently) by avant-garde artists.

³³ “Alturas de Macchu Picchu” has inspired a vast number of scholarly interpretations, the most helpful and illuminating of which are, in my view: Donald L. Shaw’s “Interpretations of *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*”; Née Jitrik’s “Alturas de Macchu Picchu: Una marcha piramidal a través de un discurso poético incesante”; and John Felstiner’s *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*.

turn, translates for the reader the ruins' hermetic message and thereby speaks on behalf of a lost American "brother." As an instance of poetic concentration or density, "Alturas de Macchu Picchu" may likewise be said to speak on behalf of the entire text that is the *Canto general*. Moreover, "Alturas" is quite literally a poem that speaks *from the catastrophe*, more specifically, from the remainders of the catastrophe.

Situated amidst the taciturn yet undying ruins of American culture, community and the coming utopia are paradoxically articulated from and founded upon these ruins. This founding gesture becomes possible precisely because there remains something undying, something capable to withstand the force, violence, and death that arrived with the original catastrophe; a residue that may be regarded as pure, indestructible life, and which, lying in a dormant state within the earth's protective refuge, is infinitely receptive to the poet's resurrectional word.

The way in which the poetic subject interacts with the ruins repeats various well-known poetic topoi. For example, the aimless wandering of the speaker, who finds himself in a state of alienation recalling that in *Residencia en la tierra*, represents an instance of the poetic "excursion." Marjorie Hope Nicolson describes the "'excursion' poets of the [European] eighteenth century" as figures that "rose upon 'wings sublime,' soared into the Newtonian heavens, then descended to earth where they flew to different lands, plumbed the depths of the ocean, and dived 'beneath the darksome caverns' into the secret places, constantly reiterating their 'delight,' 'wonder,' 'awe,' and 'astonishment' at the variety and profusion of a Nature made in the image of an exuberant Deity" (330). Similarly, she calls these poets "geology conscious," insofar as they dwelled and marveled at the vastness and sublimity of the

natural space. “*Magnificence, vastness, ruin*—no three words could better sum up the effects for which the ‘excursion’ poets were striving. In most of them a theory of the ‘natural Sublime’ was implied” (333; author’s emphasis). Nicolson’s portrayal is closely replicated by Neruda’s speaker, particularly by his vertical movement that reaches extremes of height and depth, “Newtonian heavens” and “lonesome caverns,” extremes that in Neruda’s poem are represented by the ruins themselves (“Alto arrecife de la aurora humana” ‘Vast coral-reef of the human dawn’ [*Canto* 132]) and by the earth’s “confuso esplendor” ‘confused splendor’ where the poet plunges his hand in search of the dead other (139). Neruda’s speaker, too, reiterates his wonder, awe, and astonishment (not so much delight) at the sheer encounter with the ruined city, whose fallen state in no way undermines its expressiveness and presence, its deictic authority (“Ésta fue la morada, éste es el sitio. . .” ‘This was the abode, this is the place’ [132]). If anything is fully and eloquently *here*, it is the ruins themselves, which harbor “una permanencia de piedra y de palabra” ‘a permanence of stone and of word’: the indestructible as such. This allows the poet to claim that “El reino muerto vive todavía” ‘The dead kingdom still lives’ (136), and to appoint himself as the prophetic voice that sings the marvel of imperishable life. Indeed, if earlier the poet, in pondering the nature of the infinitely exploited and infinitely destructible human being, had asked where one could locate “lo indestructible, lo imperecedero, la vida,” ‘the indestructible, the imperishable, life,’³⁴ he finds the answer and the justification

³⁴ The verses where this question appears reads: “¿Qué era el hombre? En qué parte de su conversación abierta / entre los almacenes y los silbidos, en cuál de sus movimientos metálicos / vivía lo indestructible, lo imperecedero, la vida?” ‘What was man? In what part of his open conversation / amongst warehouses and whistles, in which of his metallic movements lived the indestructible, the imperishable, life?’ (*Canto* 129).

for his song here, in the experience and interrogation of the ruins, which confirm the presence of a “life-force” that can be brought back to light, excavated and raised up, precisely because it was able to withstand the barrage of destruction—because, in other words, it is not absolutely dead.

“Alturas de Macchu Picchu” is thus an eloquent poem, one in which neither the voice nor the word are lacking. Addressing the encounter with ruins as a poetic topic, Francine Masiello suggests that

ruins impose a peculiar syntax for speaking that encounter, a grammar of double voicing, loaded with double meaning. In its most extreme manifestation, when crying out the failure of the romantic project, ruins produce aphasia; they dislocate oral language. The *unheimlich* (uncanny) of the ghostly past weighs on us, producing an inarticulate stammer. This is where speech breaks down, but it is also the point at which speech is translated creatively into poetic rhythm. (31)

Excepting Masiello’s last point (that ruins enable the creation of “poetic rhythm”), “Alturas de Macchu Picchu” does not necessarily replicate this scenario. The speaker may be seen as a “dislocated” subject, but such dislocation does not occur as an effect of the ruins’ encounter: the subject is severed (from himself and from his context) prior to his encounter with the ancient site.³⁵ Machu Picchu’s ruins, in fact, will in a certain sense amend this dislocation, serving as the site where the modern, alienated subject may find and forge a relation with the voiceless other. Speech is certainly “translated creatively into poetic rhythm,” but without undergoing the aphasic

³⁵ The speaker, prior to his journey to Machu Picchu, wanders through an alienating urban landscape: “Cuántas veces en las calles de invierno de una ciudad o en / un autobús o un barco en el crepúsculo, o en la soledad / más espesa, la de la noche de fiesta, bajo el sonido / de sombras y campanas, en la misma gruta del placer humano, / me quise detener a buscar la eterna veta insondable / que antes toqué en la piedra o en el relámpago que el beso desprendía” ‘How many times on wintry city streets or / on a bus or a ship at dusk, or in the thickest / solitude, during a festive night, under the sound / of shadows and bells, in the grotto of human pleasure, / did I want to stop and look for the eternal, unfathomable vein / which I at one time felt on the rock or on the thunder given off by a kiss’ (*Canto* 128).

experience that seems to act as its prerequisite. What “weighs” on the speaker is not the “ghostly past” but the “empty net” (*red vacía*) of the present (127). The present in all its aspects (urbanization, alienation, nomadic existence, and lonely death) is *unheimlich*, whereas Machu Picchu will rise as the proper home or dwelling, the place that puts a stop to endless wandering, the “por fin morada” ‘at last abode’ of the poetic subject (132). Rather than being the place where speech breaks down, the ruins are thus the place where it flourishes, where voice finds its interlocutor and its call; not aphasia, but eloquence; not a “ghostly past” that “weighs on” the speaker, but an imperishable past that liberates him. Ruins become the site where voice is alternately received (“habladme toda esta larga noche,” “contadme todo” ‘speak to me throughout this long night,’ ‘tell me everything’) and given (“Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta” ‘I come to speak through your dead mouth’) (141).

This process of receiving and giving voice has been viewed as inherently uneven. As Alberto Moreiras indicates, the “discursive practice” set forth by “Alturas de Macchu Picchu” (and arguably by the entire *Canto general*), consists, in part, in “producing a self-legitimizing locus of enunciation through the simultaneous positing of two radically heterogeneous fields of experience”; these two fields of experience are, quite simply, that of the dead and that of the living. Yet inevitably, and despite the speaker’s best intentions, an uneven relationship develops between the two poles; the field of the dead and the field of the living are discursively translated in the poem into the “silent pole” and the “expressive pole.” “The relational mediation,” Moreiras argues, “is then always unequal and hierarchical, even at its most redemptive” (*The Exhaustion* 222-24). Yet Moreiras’s restoration of a strongly hierarchized relational

interlocution could be complicated—and indeed deflated—through the concept of “overhearing” in poetry. The speaker in Neruda’s poem may be addressing the silent remains of the indigenous slaves who in a past long concealed from western view built Machu Picchu. But his *allocutio* is being “heard” in the present by the audiences who have witnessed his construction of the poem as alternative chronicle—as the compensatory fantasy of a poeticized and admittedly stylized chronicle spoken by another through the speaker’s words which are blood—the operative counter-archive described above.³⁶

If “Alturas” had stayed at the front of the book, as once planned, the question of overhearing would be somewhat diluted. However, coming as it does half-way through the narrative, “Alturas” is surrounded by a complex structure of mediations, *fundaciones míticas*, and intertextual *refundiciones*. Seen from this perspective, Moreiras’s point about Neruda’s implementation of a series of re-hierarchizing mediations may be less important than he makes it look. The entire book, from its very title (a “Canto general” offered in the place of—and against—any “Crónica general” penned by the victors), has been under construction *before* the implicitly addressed audience, which is not the dead Quechua slaves, but the living subalterns as they are challenged to “recite” the speaker’s prophetic utterance— to speak through his words. This strategic repositioning or replacing of “Alturas” also means that Neruda conceived of his communities of readers (overhearers) as having an ironic relationship to the *Canto* understood as a tightly plotted yet utterly fragmentary modernist collage of loosely weaved “historical” snapshots. It is only when readers turn the page to

³⁶ For more on the concept of overhearing, see Culler 165-70.

“Alturas” that organic form *happens*. At this point, identification replaces *distantiation*; poetry demands the audience’s suspension of disbelief; and the liturgy of recitation inaugurates a new gospel of hope.³⁷

Machu Picchu is then a prominent site of speaking and of language, albeit one organized hierarchically. It demands language in all its forms of reception and production: response and call, attentiveness and testimony, communication and denunciation. As I will later explain, the imperative is not only to speak incessantly of the violence and traumas endured—a speaking that would be all-too-passive, too archival, that is, overly concerned with unearthing or exposing the past and not moving beyond into the phase action, of construction. The imperative, rather, is to make language in general, and poetic discourse in particular, functional towards the present and the future. Language’s active character will therefore be revealed, in the *Canto general*, in the form of the accusatory word and in the prescription for retribution: put differently, in the demand for a new catastrophe, the radical destruction of which will be the greatest act of justice. For now, I want to stress the importance of the “first” catastrophe (the Conquest) as the event or trauma that enables speech and relationality, which combined enable what we may call *interlocution*. For it is only as a result of the catastrophe’s taking place (which ushers in/induces the rupture of the organic relation between humanity and culture) that testimony and speech (activities which entail an inherent separation of subjects with themselves and of subjects with each other) can be infinitely demanded and produced.

In order to understand better the active role that language and the poetic

³⁷ To adopt one of María Zambrano’s aphoristic definitions, the ruins of Machu Picchu become a “metaphor of hope.” See her “Una metáfora de la esperanza: las ruinas”

utterance play in Neruda's idea of community, it is necessary to look at the "pre-linguistic" or "pre-catastrophic" mode of American existence, which is described at the beginning of the *Canto general*. "La lámpara en la tierra" (113-24) envisions the land in its pre-historic lethargy ("sin nombre todavía" 'still nameless' [105]), while also foreseeing (and this capacity to foresee and to foretell is made possible by the poet's location in a properly historic, "post-lapsarian" time) the inevitable arrival of the conquering subject. As René Jara suggests, "In this state the world is ahistorical and cyclical, maternal fertility and abundance mark human existence. A similar plenitude is contained by solitude and death . . . Only the great death that is the beginning and end of everything exists" (50). The land and the people that dwell in this ahistorical space certainly know death, but this death is seen as part of the cyclical movement and harmony of the world, a harmony which, despite being located beyond human understanding, does not motivate anguish or discord: a death that is not feared, and thus one that is not regarded as catastrophic. Death, in this world, is thus part of life, indistinguishable from it. The properly historical time (the time of the Conquest) will introduce a time and a space in which this great death shatters into a multiplicity of little deaths. In contrast to the great death, the "little death" is individual, egoistic, disconnected, incoherent, and therefore utterly meaningless; it is a death that has no relation, no link to the community; a death that, put differently, refuses to be subsumed under the collective wellbeing or "good." Insofar as this little death takes place outside of the collective space, outside of the community's reach and sight, it introduces the threat of overall dissolution and senselessness. The little death that shatters the individual, that is both the individual's proper experience and the

experience that annihilates his/her property (what we may call a “Western” or “European” death), imperils the identity between individual and community, as well as that between community and nature.³⁸

Western death, however, has not yet arrived. This is not yet the time of death—of catastrophe—but that of love. “Amor América (1400)” is thus the first poem of “La lámpara en la tierra,” and it describes a land that is, as its title says, sheer love, sheer presence without appellation; a territory not yet inscribed by the violence of the signifier, an *América* (pure material reality) that is paradoxically not yet *América* (sign entered into historical unfolding) “Tierra sin nombre, sin América” ‘Land without name, without América’ (107). Pure materiality or immanence, “. . . pura noción de piedra” ‘pure notion of stone’ (118), the people who live in this *América* without *América*—and who are in many respects indistinguishable from the land—are themselves a people who are not yet a people. Not properly individualized, there exist as of yet no heroes among this people: no one is remarkable or exemplary, no one is yet properly “Americano/a.” Humans still share an organic link with the earth, which permeates all spheres of human activity: “El hombre tierra fue, vasija, párpado / del barro trémulo, forma de la arcilla” ‘Man was earth, vessel, eyelid / of the quivering mud, shape of the clay’ (105); “Como la copa de la arcilla era / la raza mineral, el hombre / hecho de piedras y de atmosfera, limpio como los cantaros,

³⁸ This “muerte pequeña,” which is at all times contrasted with the “poderosa muerte” of the human collectivity, appears in sections III and V of “Alturas de Macchu Picchu.” Section V describes it as that which is utterly unusable or inappropriate. Beyond recuperation or recovery, it is the type of the death that resists resurrection (the resurrection which the poet would want to adjudicate to his word): “Era lo que no pudo renacer, un pedazo / de la pequeña muerte sin paz ni territorio: / un hueso, una campana que morían en él” (*Canto* 131). In section III, the little death is as unremarkable and monotonous as a number: “. . . del uno al siete, al ocho, / y no una muerte, sino muchas muertes llegaba a cada uno: / cada día una muerte pequeña, polvo, gusano, lámpara / que se apaga en el lodo del suburbio . . .” (129-30).

sonoro” ‘Like the earthen cup was / the mineral race, the man / made of stones and atmosphere, clean and resonant like the jugs’ (119). Within this universe, work is not yet alienated work. Rather, work is an activity through which humans, like loud and harmonic “jugs,” metaphorically sing and announce their communion with the environment. Even sacrifice (a form of death) attains a functional role within this balanced cosmic relation:

Y la pirámide augusta,
piedra y piedra, agonía y aire,
en su estructura dominadora
guardaba como una almendra
un corazón sacrificado.
En un trueno como un aullido
caía la sangre por
las escalinatas sagradas.
Pero muchedumbres de pueblos
tejían la fibra, guardaban
el porvenir de las cosechas,
trenzaban el fulgor de la pluma,
convencían a la turquesa,
y en enredaderas textiles
expresaban la luz del mundo.

And the majestic pyramid,
stone upon stone, agony and air,
in its dominant structure
preserved like an almond
a sacrificed heart.
In a howl-like thunder
the blood fell
through the sacred staircases.
Yet crowds of people
weaved the fabric, preserved
the prospect of the harvests,
braided the glow of the pen,
convinced the turquoise,
and through textile vines
expressed the light of the world. (120-21)

Sacrifice is here juxtaposed with work; it is, in fact, a form of work: an act that, rather

than pure expenditure or excess, provides certain results and therefore holds a concrete function within the larger, mythic logic of human existence. Just as the “crowds of people,” symbolically located at the foot of the pyramid, weave the fabrics that will sustain future generations (thus both literally and metaphorically weaving the collective fabric as such), the sacrifice that takes place up above, at a higher, perhaps more divinely-linked level, achieves an analogous, positive function. Sacrifice represents another means by which to weave and strengthen the cosmic fabric that unites humans, divinities, and nature. Sacrifice, like weaving, farming, mining (or any other form of work we can think of) is an activity that “expresses,” indeed creates, “the light of the world.” The form of killing (sacrifice) that this world knows and practices is one that provides comfort and security. And this because it is expected to yield a profit, a positive result. The relationship between gods and humans is one of reciprocity, of return. If the god makes a sacrificial demand (to which humans are happy to respond), it does so with the expectation to return the deed, the offering: “y el dios de los altares impregnados” ‘and the god of the pregnant altars,’ the speaker tells us, “devolvía las flores y las vidas” ‘gave back the flowers and the lives’ (107). Once again, death and life are part of the same process: life is surrendered in the sacrificial altar; but in reality nothing is given up, for this act of surrendering, this offering, returns in the form of more life, of “flowers.”

While “La lámpara en la tierra” principally imagines “the continent in its originary light, as a heraldic genesis of plenitude” (Jara 50), it also intuits, and in a certain way announces, the impending violence. Such inevitability comes across towards the closing verses of this section, with the poet saying:

(Dulce raza, hija de sierras,
estirpe y torre y turquesa,
ciérrame los ojos ahora,
antes de irnos al mar
de donde vienen los dolores.)

(Sweet race, daughter of the mountains,
stock and tower and turquoise,
close my eyes now,
before we go on to the sea
from which the sorrows come.) (122)

The sea, of course, represents the place from which the catastrophe (the Spanish sailing in their vessels) originates, and therefore turning one's gaze toward the ocean is a painful gesture, one which can only be performed by the speaker with reluctance and indignation. Focusing on the formal character of this stanza, I would add that the enclosure of these verses within parentheses foregrounds the two temporalities which the poet and the poem seek to manage; to repeat: the time of organic unity and the time of separation between humanity and nature, in the middle of which the Conquest figures as the event that brings about the division between the two. Bundled up into a small but condensed "ball" (conveyed by the enclosing parenthesis), this stanza violently introduces itself within the surrounding harmony; it breaks up the general continuity of the poem, both formally and at the level of content. The parenthetical stanza shares an uncomfortable place within the totality of "La lámpara en la tierra"; it is certainly inside, but awkwardly so. And this because it introduces the knowledge of an event (the Conquest) that has not yet properly arrived onto this land that is not yet *América*: the event that will give the continent its proper name and identity as a historical site of struggle and insurrection, the event by which the nameless continent becomes *América*. This stanza also confirms the inherently retroactive construction of

the pure, paradisiacal land; it reminds us that the America without America can only emerge *as* fiction, *as* poetry; that it can be envisioned only after the catastrophe has taken place and performed its violence. Put differently, the poetic subject shares an intimate link with the catastrophe; in the case of the *Canto general*, the poet's speaking (his song) testifies to the irreversible arrival of the Conquest; the poet writes from a "post-natural" time and space, from a position that is not "at one with" or organically tied to the natural order, but inherently and irreparably severed—otherwise there would be no need to tell the story and no poetic voice to begin with. If the poet makes his presence explicitly felt, informing us of the validity of his testimony ("Yo estoy aquí para contar la historia" 'I am here to recount the story' [106]), this is because a fundamental division has already taken place, because the condition of possibility for historical and poetic narration is a certain separation or fall from wholeness.

The Day of Justice

Henceforth, the poet's and the community's task will be to unearth the residues of memory and culture that have resisted total annihilation (in other words, that are receptive to a poetic resurrection), and which lie buried under the earth's protective layer. To excavate and to recognize, to exhume and to give life, to construct anew the American "household": these will be the steps undertaken by the *Canto general's* poetic archeology. At stake in this process is the recuperation of a lost father ("the busqué, padre mío, / joven guerrero de tiniebla y cobre" 'I looked for you, my father, / young warrior of darkness and copper' [106]), and the (re)construction of a genealogy

of heroic paternal figures that may grant the community guidance and purpose.³⁹ As Jara suggests, “The function of the poet will be to weave the fabric of history, to undertake the impossible task of rescuing the origin” (47). To Jara’s remark, I would add that the origin to be reconfigured is, to repeat, a paternal one; the speaker excavates the (maternal) earth to find therein future (paternal) actors of the revolution; the earth thus assumes the stereotypical role of providing shelter and refuge within its terrestrial “womb,” while the revolutionary actors become the active subjects to be given birth in order to bring about the desired historical change. “Llegará el día” alludes to such a birth through the simultaneous allusion to the Christian notion of the *dies irae* in its very title. The speaker refers here to the future “liberators,” situating their coming in the pregnant temporality between dusk (“crepúsculo”) and dawn (“oscuridad de la mañana”) (288). He urges them to make good on the promise of a catastrophic day given to them by a long (but not futile) sacrificial history:

No renunciéis al día que os entregan
 los muertos que lucharon. Cada espiga
 nace de un grano entregado a la tierra,
 y como el trigo, el pueblo innumerable
 junta raíces, acumula espigas,
 y en la tormenta desencadenada
 sube a la claridad del universo.

Do not forsake the day which the dead
 who fought for it offer you. Each stem
 is born from a seed offered to the land,

³⁹ In a different context, Brett Levinson argues that “patriarchy is precisely this attempt to bring back the dead father” (*The Ends* 198). Levinson makes this comment in reference to Santiago Colás’s reading of Piglia’s *Respiración artificial*, which Colás interprets as an attempt to reconnect with the missing “fathers.” Instead, Levinson reads Piglia’s text as “the construction of ‘family’ or community not as part of a ‘bloody institution,’ of a bloodline, but as an antigenetic genealogy” (73). “I am trying to read,” he further indicates, “*Artificial Respiration* as a challenge to the patriarchal structure of dictatorship, which is why I emphasize its movement away from the ‘family romance’ and toward the question of sociality: toward relationality not as given beforehand but as created, as a political praxis” (198).

and like the wheat, the numberless people
gather up roots, accumulate stems,
and in the unraveled storm
rise up to the clarity of the universe. (*Canto* 289)

Throughout the text, the visionary speaker will allude to this coming day, at times interposing it to an “other” day, that is, the present day which bathes the world in its “sinister” light. In this manner, that is to say through the use of two figures that are formally the same yet radically different in regards to their content (the sinister day versus the day of justice distribute their violence in different ways), the speaker reproduces the historical scheme of the two catastrophes, which are also formally analogous yet “denotatively” distinct:

Porque el siniestro día del mar termina un día,
y la mano nocturna corta uno a uno sus dedos
hasta no ser, hasta que el hombre nace
y el capitán descubre dentro de sí el acero
y la América sube su burbuja
y la costa levanta su pálido arrecife
sucio de aurora, turbio de nacimiento
hasta que de la nave sale un grito y se ahoga
y otro grito y el alba que nace de la espuma.

Because the sinister day of the sea ends one day,
and the nocturnal hand severs one by one its fingers
until it is no more, until the man is born
and the captain discovers the steel inside of him
and the American bubble rises up
and the coast lifts up its pale reef
thick with dawn, dark with birth
until a scream is let out of the ship and is drowned
and another scream and the dawn surging from the foam. (*Canto* 180)

As this stanza makes clear, the arrival of the “true” day is complimented by the arrival of justice in the form of violent retribution. The catastrophic day will be simultaneously “el día final del sufrimiento” ‘the last day of suffering’ (352) for some

and the day of radical suffering for others—in the preceding stanza, the day in which the “captain” suddenly discovers the “steel” of a blade or knife lodged within his flesh.

There is an important moment in the *Canto general* in which the speaker contemplates an option different from that of violent retribution, and which in fact represents its exact opposite: radical forgetting:

*Tal vez el olvido sobre la tierra como una copa
puede desarrollar el crecimiento y alimentar la vida
(puede ser), como el humus sombrío en el bosque.*

...

*Tal vez, pero mi plato es otro, mi alimento es distinto:
mis ojos no vinieron para morder olvido:
mis labios se abren sobre todo el tiempo, y todo el tiempo,
no sólo una parte del tiempo ha gastado mis manos.*

*Perhaps forgetting on earth like a cup
could promote growth and nourish life
(it could be), as does the dark humus in the forest.*

...

*Perhaps, but my plate is different, my feed is different:
my eyes did not come to gnaw into forgetting:
my lips open upon the whole of time, and all of time,
not only a part of time, has worn out my hands. (Canto 293; author's
emphasis)*

From the speaker's viewpoint, this option is always already insufficient. His reticence and dissidence with respect to forgetting is made clear by the repeated “tal vez” and the perhaps more sarcastic “puede ser” (one of the few instances in the entire text in which expressions of doubt are employed). The speaker makes it very clear that his character, his sense of justice, will only be satiated by a different kind of nourishment (*alimento*). Driven by an imperative to both recount and denounce, the speaker feels compelled to make the reader not only aware of the continent's past violence, but to somehow relive it: “Por eso te hablaré de estos dolores que quisiera apartar, / te

obligaré a vivir una vez más entre sus quemaduras” ‘For this reason I will speak to you of those pains I would like to set aside, / I will force you to live once again amongst their burning marks’ (293). This process represents, for the speaker, not only an ethical move, but an epistemological one as well (a process, in his words, that allows for a “caminar conociendo” ‘knowing walk’ and for making “decisiones infinitamente cargadas de sentido” ‘decisions infinitely-charged with meaning’). The sacrificer’s sacrifice, in short, represents the condition of possibility for the nerudian coming community: “para que la severidad sea una condición de la alegría” ‘so that ruthlessness may become the condition of happiness.’

Elsewhere, the speaker describes himself as “dulce como las uvas, y terrible, / conductor del azucar y el castigo” ‘sweet like grapes, and terrible, dispenser of sugar and punishment’ (379); he acknowledges, in other words, the simultaneously lyrical and accusatory nature of his song. “Dispenser” not only describes the poet’s ability to steer his discourse in the manner most appropriate for the completion of his prophecy, but also implies the poet’s assumption of a certain task of juridical distribution or administration, the dispensation of blame and innocence to those who respectively deserve it. “Serán nombrados” ‘They will be named,’ he says with respect to the guilty parties (538), and, elsewhere, he hears the dead addressing him:

Me dijeron: ‘Te debes a nosotros,
eres el que pondrá la marca fría
sobre los sucios nombres del malvado’.

They told me: ‘You owe yourself to us,
you will be the one who puts the cold brand
on the soiled names of the evil one.’ (*Canto* 534)⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Santí points to the biblical allusion of these verses: “The words of the ‘people’ contain a biblical allusion to Ezequiel 9:4, ‘Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a

With respect to the oppressor's crime (otherwise unspeakable or beyond representation), he firmly says:

yo no voy a cantarlo ni callarlo,
voy a dejar su número y su nombre
clavado en la pared de la deshonra.

I will neither sing of him nor keep myself quiet,
I will leave his number and his name
nailed upon the wall of shame. (*Canto* 543)

If economy signified originally the administration of the household roles and tasks (a term later adopted by theological discourse to signify more generally the manner in which God administers humanity's salvation, as well as the way in which the Church administers His earthly kingdom)⁴¹, economy in the *Canto general* may be said to hark back to this original meaning: the poet, too, assigns a clear "role" to the inhabitants of the American "household," and which are essentially those of either victim or victimizer, sacrificed or sacrificer. The poet assigns culpability as well as innocence; and in this manner he also separates, divides the human and natural geography, marks the limits between blame and blamelessness, between those who hold responsibility and those who received the effects of irresponsibility.

The latter group—that is, the receptors of brutal, irresponsible violence—will be interpreted by the speaker as demanding retribution. Thus, he says that "Por esos muertos, nuestros muertos, / pido castigo" "On behalf of the dead, our dead, / I ask for

mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.' Nonetheless, the chronicler inverts the mark's function: this time it is the wicked ones who are marked, not the saved ones" (Introducción 534). To Santí's commentary, I would add that just as the concept of *catastrophe* is reversed in the *Canto general* to signify either a positive or negative event, the *mark* becomes a mutable figure subject to a similar reversal in its signification.

⁴¹ See Mondzain 18-66.

punishment' (350); and elsewhere, as he addresses the living community that surrounds him, "Y esto es cuanto quería deciros, camaradas: / hace falta el castigo" 'And this is all I wanted to tell you, comrades: / what is missing is punishment' (*Canto* 435). Repeating the earlier-voiced belief that "ruthlessness" is the condition of possibility for "happiness," the speaker envisions the future community or "homeland" as one that knows, in equal measure, how to "bloom" and how to "punish":

Compatriotas, hermanos muertos de Sewell, muertos
de Chile, obreros, hermanos, camaradas,
hoy que estáis silenciosos, vamos a hablar nosotros.
Y que vuestro martirio nos ayude
a construir una patria severa
que sepa florecer y castigar.

Compatriots, dead brothers of Sewell, dead ones
from Chile, workers, brothers, comrades,
today when you are silent, we are going to speak.
And let your martyrdom help us
build a ruthless homeland
that knows how to bloom and how to punish. (*Canto* 436)

I could cite more examples of the *Canto general*'s catastrophic perception of historical progression and of communal configuration, further examples as well of the imperative that it issues with respect to assigning blame and innocence, further examples, finally, of its conviction in the residual life that resists death and of its belief in the future resurrection of the formerly- and currently-oppressed collective subject. But perhaps it may be best to cite a passage that brilliantly (that is, with precise *economy*) condenses these notions in a few, moving verses:

*No me siento solo en la noche,
en la oscuridad de la tierra.
Soy pueblo, pueblo innumerable.*

*Tengo en mi voz la fuerza pura
para atravesar el silencio
y germinar en las tinieblas.
Muerte, martirio, sombra, hielo,
cubren de pronto la semilla.
Y parece enterrado el pueblo.
Pero el maíz vuelve a la tierra.
Atravesaron el silencio
sus implacables manos rojas.
Desde la muerte renacemos.*

*I do not feel alone in the night,
in the dark earth.
I am people, numberless people.
I have in my voice the pure force
to traverse the silence
and to bloom in the dark.
Death, martyrdom, shadow, ice
all suddenly blanket the seed.
And the people seem buried.
But the maize returns to the earth.
Their red, relentless hands
passed through the silence.
From death we are reborn. (Canto 484; author's emphasis)*

To resume, *Canto general* may be said to provide a mythical version of community's formation and future, thereby providing it with an image or ideal (vital and triumphant in its representation) toward which the present community may aspire. "Myth, in this context, is that to which a political community appeals in order to found its existence as such and to perpetuate that existence as the intimate sharing of an identity or essence" (James 196). If for Jean-Luc Nancy "Myth is above all a full and original speech, which both reveals and forms the intimate being of a community," and if, moreover, "In myth the world makes itself known, and it makes itself known through declaration or through a complete and decisive revelation" (*The Inoperative* 48), then Neruda's narrative may be regarded fundamentally as myth, inasmuch as it is

voiced through the full speech of the poet-prophet and, in its own way, also purports to make the world known to and for the community (we may recall here the above-cited gesture of a “knowing walk,” as well as the overarching classificatory or archival character of the poem). Community can certainly be founded upon myth; the benefit of doing so is that it makes origins and ends apprehensible by means of representation, thus “tak[ing] away its secret,” the secret of its origin and of its end, and thereby allowing it “at last to identify itself, absolutely, around its own pronouncement and its own birth” (*The Inoperative* 46). Myth, in a certain sense, provides a frame (the frame constituted by the limits of its birth and of its end); returning to the concept of economy, myth may be said to *frame* the community, to administer, delineate or make visible its beginning and its end, its origin and its conclusion in catastrophe; by means of myth, the design or economy of the community is rendered perceptible and knowledgeable to its members.⁴²

Myth also makes itself present through the implementation of violence, the characteristic of which is also a strong claim to visibility. In this sense, the violence rendered imaginable and desirable in the *Canto general* is analogous to the concept of “mythical violence” as understood by Benjamin. In “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin describes mythical violence as fundamentally visible, as taking place, that is, on the level of representation: only thus, in rendering its violent character manifest, does it accomplish its work, which is essentially the perpetuation of power and the

⁴² Although Nancy does not refer to the traditional function of myth in a way that evokes the notion of economy as a process of “administration,” he does speak of myth as a “binding” operation: “[mythic speech] presupposes an uninterrupted world of presences or an uninterrupted world of truths, or else, for this is already saying too much, it presupposes neither ‘presence’ nor ‘truth,’ nor at times even ‘gods,’ but rather a way of binding the world and attaching oneself to it, a *religio* whose utterances would be ‘great speech’ (*grand parler*)” (*The Inoperative* 49).

preservation of the form of law (even on those occasions in which it destroys the law in order to institute a new law).⁴³ “Mythical violence in its archetypal form is a mere manifestation of the gods. Not a means to their ends, scarcely a manifestation of their will, but first of all a manifestation of their existence” (“Critique” 294). In opposition to “divine violence,” which is characterized as being “pure means,” mythical violence is primarily “ends.” “Pure means” are imperceptible while “ends” are eminently visible. For this reason, “. . . only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty” (300), whereas divine violence may very well escape recognition (“the expiatory power of [divine] violence is not visible to men”). Benjamin regards divine violence as the only means by which the vicious cycle of mythical, law-preserving and institutioning violence may be broken. As Tracy McNulty explains, for Benjamin, “The only solution, then, is to oppose violence with violence” (39). At first, the *Canto general* would seem to propose a similar way out of this impasse: the only way to shatter the catastrophe is through the force of another catastrophe; only the sacrifice of the sacrificer will render a just retribution. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that divine violence does not necessarily produce or require a visible manifestation, an ostensive requisite in the nerudian paradigm; in Benjamin’s words, divine violence is “lethal without spilling blood” (297), and in McNulty’s reading, “it is lethal to the legal order, but not lethal to life” (42), whereas the Nerudian understanding of violence and of catastrophe (and, consequently, of the community attaining its foundation therein) remains fixed to the level of visibility (representation) and in fact demands its constant and vivid

⁴³ “A gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising and falling in the lawmaking and law-preserving formations of violence” (“Critique” 300).

iconization.

Having presented, I hope, a persuasive reading of the *Canto general*'s catastrophic and sacrificial vision of history and its relationship to poetic discourse, and limiting myself to the Chilean poetic canon—to those figures institutionalized or monumentalized by the Latin American literary and critical traditions—I would like to once again elucidate the general scope or frame of my project by asking: Who would represent, embody, or inaugurate best a tradition that regards community as founded upon catastrophe? Who would regard the poet as possessor of a redemptive voice? Who would be the poet of destruction and of resurrection? The poet of verticality and ascent? Of overcoming and triumph? Who, on the other hand, could be described as the poet of dispossession and renunciation? As the figure that inaugurates an alternate tradition that embraces the fragile, weak, or inoperative nature of both the community and the poetic voice? Who would be the poet of “high intensity” and who would be the poet of “low intensity”? Who would think catastrophe as a name (singularity, event or exception) and who would think catastrophe as an adjective (enduring condition)?

The reader can of course easily decide by now which of these questions merit the name “Pablo Neruda” and which merit the name “Gabriela Mistral” as their answer. Within the general poetic narrative that my project seeks to outline, Mistral would stand as a decisive figure (even “foundational,” though I hesitate to use this word) in a thinking of community from a perspective that may generally be referred to as “fragile” or “desolate.” The conditions, characteristics, as well as the social and aesthetic contexts that inspire this desolate form of poetic discourse and community

are the topic of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2

Re-turn to Christ: Gabriela Mistral and the Fragile Community

Modernista Communities

In its preference for semantic and syntactic austerity, Mistral's poetry positioned itself at odds with its *modernista* predecessor—a movement which, some critics argue, encouraged a distinction between what one may call “literary” and “non-literary” communities.⁴⁴ In Gerard Aching's view, *modernismo* “created and promoted distinctions between competent or at least appreciative readers and ‘less privileged’—that is, the unenlightened and/or dissenting ones” (19). Aching, to be sure, reads the *modernista* aesthetic as one that—contrary to the escapist portrayal—was at all times critically engaged with its social milieu. Thus, the poet's well-known *reino interior* image of irrationalist self-withdrawal (akin to the scholar's stereotypical *ivory tower*) stood as the metaphoric refuge. It emerged as an effect of the negative and disaffected relationship between *modernismo* and society; in other words, it functioned *in response to* rather than as a detachment from its social context. More than the representation for art's isolated and unpolluted character, the *reino interior* stood as the critical barrier that at once separated and united *modernista* refinement

⁴⁴ *Modernismo* is not equivalent to European or North American modernism (the Hispanic equivalent to the latter term would be *las vanguardias*). Multiple and often contradictory definitions of *modernismo* have been proposed. Generally speaking, *modernismo* is a movement that develops in the Hispanic literary world between 1880 and 1920, and which has as its central figure the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (thus, some critics prefer to frame the movement between 1888 and 1916, which are respectively the years in which Darío published his first book, *Azul*, and the year in which the poet died). *Modernismo* is generally regarded as a movement that renovated Hispanic poetry through original assimilations of various nineteenth century tendencies such as romanticism, symbolism, decadentism, and parnassianism, and which developed more or less “autonomously.” For more on the history of the movement see Henríquez Ureña; for discussions on the relevance of the concept itself see Cardwell and McGuirk.

with society's purported materialism. The *reino interior* thus represented a metaphoric space that shielded artists and poets from the "barbarism" of the metropolitan outside while nonetheless sustaining an uncomfortable and negative relationship with it—its very *raison d'être* being the consumerist drive and alienated condition into which urban Latin American society, in the *modernistas'* eyes, seemed to have fallen by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century.

Not everyone, of course, had access to this *modernista* refuge or "interior realm," whose material counterpart was after all the Parnassian world of gardens, museums, and cabinets of wonders characteristic of elite connoisseurship. An exclusivist attitude was adopted in accordance to the privileged socio-economic status of *modernismo's* members and targeted audiences. Paradoxically, the *modernistas* belonged to and were largely sustained by the very class—the bourgeoisie—whose habits they consistently criticized. The bourgeoisie, in other words, represented the movement's primary reading/consumer audience. The *reino interior* community was composed of and open to individuals of a particular socio-economic sector: its very own. It was a community that gave itself back to itself, both in terms of readership and of economic support. Thus, for example, Rubén Darío simultaneously gave and received what he expected to and from his readers, reproducing a kind of mercantile, reciprocal exchange of goods between poet and readership. In offering a book of poetry to his readers—who naturally possessed the means to accede to it as a cultural object or merchandise—these "define[d] themselves on the basis of their power to acquire what the poet advertise[d] as unique and incomparable" (Aching 33). For instance, while Darío received economic and cultural profit from this audience, in

exchange “he provided his bourgeois and well-to-do readers with a social imaginary grounded in class exclusivity” (27).

To be sure, other poets had a more conflicted relation to both the opportunities for transcendence available through the artistic calling and the positivism inherent in urban life, as shown in José Martí’s lyrics of artistic self-consciousness. Such poems as “Amor de ciudad grande” and “Sed de belleza” feature a poetic persona who feels simultaneously drawn to urban-material consumption and artistic-liturgical communion.⁴⁵ Martí’s vessels span the continuum of charismatic chalices, intoxicating liquors, and empty glasses; as if the poet suspected that the enjoyment of aesthetic beauty was coterminous with the indulgence of gross sensuality in an increasingly secular age. As his chronicles of Parisian academic life and his translations from handbooks of Hellenism also show, Martí partook of Bolívar’s idealization of primitive life in classical antiquity, adhering to the notion that the advent of the “empire” fatally eroded the communal ethos of earlier forms of political organization and the cultivation of republican virtues. The fact that Martí ultimately surrendered his attraction to ornate art forms, as he also embraced a socially-engaged political stance, greatly complicates the chronology of *modernismo*. Martí’s most

⁴⁵ In “Amor de ciudad grande,” the speaker confesses: “¡Me espanta la ciudad! ¡Toda está llena / De copas por vaciar, o huecas copas! / ¡Tengo miedo ¡ay de mí! de que este vino / Tósigo sea, y en mis venas luego / Cual duende vengador los dientes clave! / ¡Tengo sed, —mas de un vino que en la tierra / No se sabe beber!” “The city frightens me! All of it is full / Of empty glasses, or hollow glasses! / I am afraid—woe is me!—that this wine / May be poison, and that later it may sink / its teeth in my veins like a vengeful goblin! / I thirst for a wine that no one knows / How to drink on earth!” (Martí 112). In “Sed de belleza,” after having made patent his solitude (“Solo, estoy solo” ‘Alone, I am alone’), the speaker tells the city: “Dadme lo sumo y lo perfecto: dadme / Un dibujo de Angelo: una espada / Con puño de Cellini, más hermosa / Que las techumbres de marfil calado / Que se place en labrar Naturaleza (. . .) Dadme mi cielo azul . . . dadme la pura / Alma de mármol que al soberbio Louvre / Dio, cual su espuma y flor, Milo famosa” ‘Give me hight and perfection: give me / A drawing by [Michael]angelo: a sword / With a hilt by Cellini, more beautiful / Than those ivory roofs / Happily carved by Nature (. . .) Give me my blue sky . . . give me the pure / Ivory soul which was given to the proud / Louvre, like foam and flower, by the famous Milo” (108-09).

self-reflexive take on the social and psychological consequences of *modernista* writing (embodied by the two poems cited above) in fact predates and deconstructs (*avant la lettre*, as it were) the triumph of Parnassian *modernismo* (which Ricardo Gullón aptly describes as “marmoreal” [*marmóreo*]) as it fully developed later on. When Darío turned his exocitizing renewal of poetic diction, localities, and motifs into a recognizable Latin American product worldwide, Martí had not only overcome the temptations of undertaking such writing again; by then he was actually dead.

Beginning with Darío and continuing with the likes of Julián del Casal in Cuba, José Asunción Silva in Colombia, or Julio Herrera y Reissig in Uruguay, *modernismo* resorted to what Ángel Rama called the “democratic masks”—the poets’ oppositional antagonizing of key social institutions—without in fact falling in line with what were at the time considered to be the democratic tenets of liberal parliamentarism in a wider public sphere: the expansion of the suffrage, mandatory public instruction, etc.

Modernismo’s militantly progressive camp remained a minority. Only a handful of highly influential *modernistas*—the Peruvian Manuel González Prada being perhaps the best-known example—could justly be called actively progressive liberals and thus be placed closer to the ongoing social struggles of their time, even if political adscriptions did not necessarily correlate then (as today) with socially progressive or retrogressive attitudes regarding workers’ rights, national cohesiveness, and so on.

Returning to Mistral’s place within this conflictive cultural context, we may say that if the mainstream *modernista* poet furnished its reader with a highly-ornate object (a “jewel,” to use their own rhetoric), Mistral furnished her own reader with an object stripped of all decorative character (mere “clay” or “dirt”). If the one attempted

to cater to the refined taste of the aesthetically-inclined, literate reader, the other attempted to engage the reader's "elemental" and ethical disposition through the deployment of a simpler, unassuming discourse.

This shift from ornateness to bareness, from the artificial to the natural, can be observed in comparing "Mi verso," an "exquisite" poem by Amado Nervo, with Mistral's "Motivos del barro," both of which can be interpreted as promoting a distinct *ars poetica*. I choose Amado Nervo because Mistral made specific references to him in both her poetic and non-poetic output, curiously always in a positive light.⁴⁶ In keeping with the Parnassian vein of *modernismo*, Nervo describes his verses and poems as highly-crafted and luxurious objects:

Querría que mi verso, de guijarro,
En gema se trocase y en joyero;
que fuera entre mis manos como el barro
en la mano genial del alfarero.

I wish that my verse, from a pebble,
would turn into a gem and into a jewel case;
that it would be in my hands
as mud in the gifted hands of the potter. (113)

While Nervo makes some concessions to imagery of a more vernacular or "humble" character (in his references to mud and to pottery), these images are subjected to a process of sublimation or idealization whereby base matter, through the craftsman's skill, is transformed into a beautiful, decorative piece that ultimately adjusts itself to the ideal form originally envisioned by the artist's "numinous" power ("Que, dócil a mi afán, [el verso] tomase todas / las formas que mi numen ha soñado" "That, docile to

⁴⁶ *Desolación* includes "In Memoriam," (72-73) an elegiac piece composed shortly after Nervo's death (1919). Mistral and Nervo also held a brief epistolary exchange from 1916-1917; to read the few letters Mistral addressed to Nervo, see Loveluck.

my will, [the verse] would take on all / the forms that my numen has envisioned' [113]). As such, what is ultimately celebrated is the ornate end-product of the sublimating process—the sensuous, flawless object that is the poem itself: “chalice,” “lamp,” “papal crucifix,” “mirror,” “crown,” and so on. (113-14). Faithful to an aesthetics that celebrates technique and crafted materiality, Nervo says that the best compliment he could receive would emphasize the exquisite, versatile nature of his poetry:

Yo trabajo, mi fe no se mitiga,
y, troquelando estrofas con mi sello,
un verso acuñaré del que se diga:
Tu verso es como el oro sin la liga:
radiante, dúctil, poliforme y bello.

I labor, my faith undiminished,
and, stamping stanzas with my seal,
a verse I will mint of which it will be said:
Your verse is like pure gold:
radiant, ductile, multiform and beautiful. (114)

Nervo's *ars poetica* can be contrasted with Mistral's "Motivos del barro," a prose-poem included in *Desolación* (1922). In addition to distancing itself from "Mi verso[']s]" refined semantics (its fondness for antiquated words like *guijarro* and *numen*), Mistral's poem attempts to open poetic representation onto a more "realistic" thematic field; it does so by incorporating, for instance, the life and physical toil of working-class subjects and by imagining these subjects as both active and creative members of an artistic community that is formed around manual and physical labor. Likewise, it avoids the narcissism implicit in Nervo's and *modernismo*'s attitude, which comes across in the former's use of the possessive in "Mi verso," a form that allows the poet to assume a proprietary stance with respect to his poetic production.

Nervo in particular, and *modernista* poets in general, would seem to refuse to “share” their poetic objects freely; or, as in Darío’s case, they do this sharing with only a select minority.⁴⁷ The section from “Motivos del barro” titled “Las ánforas” may be read as a response to this attitude:

Ya hallaste por el río la greda roja y la greda negra; ya amasas las ánforas, con los ojos ardientes.
Alfarero, haz la de todos los hombres, que cada uno la precisa semejante al propio corazón.

Haz el ánfora del campesino, fuerte el asa, esponjado el contorno como la mejilla del hijo. No turbará por la gracia, será el Ánfora de la Salud.

Haz el ánfora del sensual; hazla ardiente como la carne que ama; pero, para purificar su instinto, dale delgado labio.

Haz el ánfora del triste; hazla sencilla como una lagrima, sin un pliegue, sin una franja coloreada, porque el dueño no le mirará la hermosura. Y amásala con el lodo de las hojas secas, para que halle al beber el olor de los otoños, que es el perfume mismo de su corazón.

Haz el ánfora de los miserables, tosca, cual un puño, desgarrada de dar, y sangrienta, como la granada. Será el Ánfora de la Protesta.

Y haz el ánfora de Leopardi, el ánfora de los torturados que ningún amor supo colmar. Hazles el vaso en que miren su propio corazón, para que se odien más. No echarán en ella ni el vino ni el agua, que será el Ánfora de la Desolación. Y su seno vaciado inquietará más que si estuviera colmada de sangre. (*Desolación* 211-12)

You have already found the red and black silted clay by the river.
Already, with fiery eyes, you’re shaping the amphoras.

Potter, make the amphora of every person, so that each resembles the person’s own heart.

Make the amphora of the man from the country, with a strong handle and a rounded contour like his child’s cheek. It will not be troubled by elegance, but will be the Amphora of Health.

Make the amphora of the sensualist. Make it ardent like loving flesh, but in order to purify its instinct, give it a spiritual lip, a delicate lip.

⁴⁷ Aching analyses this auto-possessive instinct in Darío through a close look at “Palabras liminares,” the prologue to *Prosas profanas* (1896), where Darío guarantees “that he is in full possession of his art: ‘Mi literatura es *mía* en mí; [My literature is mine in me]” (31). It is important to keep in mind Darío’s later disavowal of this former “self,” a disavowal that would include his belief in the self-possession of one’s art. Thus, Darío’s famous “Yo soy aquel” (the inaugurating piece of *Cantos de vida y esperanza* [1905]) includes the following self-criticism: “La torre de marfil tentó mi anhelo; / quise encerrarme dentro de mí mismo, y tuve hambre de espacio y sed de cielo / desde las sombras de mi propio abismo” ‘The ivory tower tempted my desires; / I tried to lock myself within me, / and grew hungry for space and thirsty for sky / from the shadows of my own abyss’ (*Songs* 56-57).

Make the amphora of the mournful. Make it simple as a tear, no frieze, no colored decoration, because the owner will not look at its beauty. Shape it from the mud of dry leaves, so that when one drinks from it, one will find the scent of autumns, which is the very perfume of one's heart.

Make the amphora of the wretched: coarse, like a fist, torn from giving, and bloody, like a pomegranate. it will be the Amphora of Protest.

And make the amphora of Leopardi, the amphora of the tormented ones whom no love could fill. Make them the vessel in which they may see their own hearts, that they may despise themselves all the more. They will put neither wine nor water in it. That will be the Amphora of Desolation.

And that empty bosom will disturb anyone who looks at it, more than if it were brimming with blood. (*Selected Prose* 62-63)

The first noticeable difference between this poem and Nervo's is the implied presence of two subjects within the poetic "narrative." The speaker of "Las ánforas" addresses a "you" (the potter); the speaker of "Mi verso" addresses himself or no one in particular (the closest he comes to an address is when he says, in the impersonal, "un verso acuñaré del que se diga"). In being constructed as an address, Mistral's poem opens or suggests the possibility of a reply, of dialogue, and thereby of a community characterized by a dialectics of call and response: communication. Nervo's speaker at best addresses an abstraction (the near or far future, humanity as such, an unknown yet ideal reader), but a more plausible suggestion is that the message (and the desire expressed therein) is addressed to himself: a soliloquy. Thus, while Nervo stresses the solitary aspects of poetic creation and of (hopefully future) celebration, Mistral's "ars poetica" emphasizes its dialogic, "shared," or communal character.

Just as Nervo is willing to make some concessions toward a more unembellished imagery, Mistral acknowledges her indebtedness to *modernista* aesthetics by speaking of the art-object as an "amphora," as well as by including an explicit reference to Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837)—a figure from Italian

romanticism that influenced Spanish American *modernismo*.⁴⁸ Yet in contrast to Nervo's poem, which articulates a belief in what may be called the poet's *sameness* or *mineness* (an affirmation of artistic selfhood as issuing from and belonging to the self; a belief in the poem as the creator's inalienable property), Mistral's poem allocates poetic creation onto the potter, thereby "dispossessing" the poet of her otherwise exclusive labor, or, at the very least, viewing this labor (and its end-product, the poem) as shared or common. Furthermore, in suggesting that the potter craft an amphora "of the man from the country" and of the "wretched" (in addition, of course, to the amphora of the "sensualist," of the "mournful," and of "Leopardi"), Mistral's piece issues an *ars poetica* with an openly social inclination, to the point of suggesting that poetry should play an actively contestatory role within the socio-political field (hence the reference to an "Amphora of Protest").

The last amphora to which the speaker refers (Leopardi's) is equally ambivalent in its simultaneous indebtedness to and disavowal of *modernista* aesthetics. The mere reference to Leopardi represents a tribute to the movement he emblemizes (Italian Romanticism) as well as to its Spanish-American heirs. Yet her advising the potter to craft it in such a way that those who receive it would be able to "see their own hearts" (a critique of *modernista* narcissism), and in so doing "despise themselves all the more," suggests a negative and disapproving stance with respect to *modernismo*'s presumed fascination with the self. Finally, the next-to-last sentence ("No echarán en ella ni el vino ni el agua, que será el Ánfora de la Desolación") is ambiguous in that it does not make it entirely clear whether we have moved on to a

⁴⁸ See Ewing for more on the link between Leopardi and *modernismo*.

different amphora or are still envisioning Leopardi's. Nonetheless, I side with the above-quoted English translation (which resolves the ambiguity: 'They will put neither wine nor water in it. That will be the Amphora of Desolation') in believing that this is a separate amphora, one which intends to mark a division between Mistral's *Desolación* and its precursors. This amphora, the speaker says, will be filled with neither wine nor water (symbols here of *modernista* opulence), an act that would betray its self-imposed asceticism. *Desolación* will instead remain empty, depleted; it will provide neither comfort nor relief, "disturb[ing] anyone who looks at it, more than if it were brimming with blood."⁴⁹

A prose-poem titled "El Arte" (also included in *Desolación*) represents another example wherein Mistral's *ars poetica* may be discerned and contrasted with her precursors'. It should be clear by now how important it is to put these statements of poetic profession in the hybrid form of the prose poem, as if Mistral were literally trying to distance herself from the formal perfection of *modernista* poetry by proposing that poetic discourse shape itself in a manner closer to conversational or colloquial language. Beyond this formal difference, "El Arte" reiterates poetry's link with alterity, its issuing from a contact with the world and, more poignantly, from a confrontation with suffering. Poetry is "song," and it emerges in response to either beauty or pain (although based upon the imagery, which includes various references to

⁴⁹ "El vaso," also included in *Desolación*, can be taken as yet another example of Mistral's rejection of material extravagance and splendor. As in "Motivos del barro," an object-container acts as a symbol for the poem itself. The poem explores the relationship between death and commemoration, envisioning its elegiac function as analogous to that of the urn wherein the dead's ashes are deposited: "Yo sueño con un vaso humilde y simple de arcilla" 'I dream of a humble and simple clay-vessel; "No quiero espolvorearlas en vaso de oro ardiente, / ni en la ánfora pagana que carnal línea ensaya: / sólo un vaso de arcilla te ciña simplemente, / humildemente, como un pliegue de mi saya." 'I do not wish to pour them in a container of bright gold, / nor in the pagan amphora of carnal design: / may nothing more than a clay-urn, modestly, / humbly keep you, like a fold in my skirt' (*Desolación* 136).

“blood,” the latter seems to be a more common source of inspiration; additionally, beauty appears in this poem as “disturbing,” that is, as a kind of pain).⁵⁰ As expressive of pain, song is also a wound: “Una canción es una herida que nos abrieron las cosas” ‘A song is a wound inflicted by things’ (219). A wound is, by definition, a response to an outside force—in this case, the paradoxically painful beauty of the world: “Una canción es una respuesta que damos a la hermosura del mundo. Y la damos con un temblor incontenible. Y la damos con un temblor incontenible, como el tuyo delante de un seno desnudo” ‘A song is a response that we give to the world’s beauty. And we give it with an uncontrollable trembling. And we give it with an uncontrollable trembling, like the one you experience when facing a naked bosom.’ The trembling [*temblor*] characteristic of the song is the physical, material evidence of contact and alteration. The last line quoted addresses the “hombre basto [sic]” ‘vast man,’ a figure mentioned earlier in the poem and who, in the speaker’s perception, responds with as great intensity to entirely different stimuli (“solo te turba un vientre de mujer, el montón de carne de la mujer” ‘you are only moved by a woman’s womb, the pile of flesh that is woman’). A possible allusion to the decadent *modernista* artist whose excitement arises from the voyeuristic gaze of a woman’s flesh, Mistral’s piece argues that poetic response should arise from an encounter with the Other as a sentient and suffering being rather than as an objectified body. In its subsequent sections, “El Arte” further develops the idea of poetry as song, and of song as issuing primarily from pain: “Una mujer está cantando en el valle” ‘A woman is singing on the valley’ (219), her heart “vivo de dolor, ardiente de dolor” ‘alive with pain, ablaze with pain.’

⁵⁰ “Nosotros vamos *turbados*, nosotros recibimos *la lanzada* de toda belleza del mundo . . .” ‘Disturbed we go, receiving the *spear-wound* of all the world’s beauty. . .’ (*Desolación* 219; emphasis added).

Significantly, the poem situates this woman on the landscape, “on the valley,” rather than in an urban scenario. She is surrounded by and finds in natural phenomena an analogy for her emotions: “La noche que viene se materniza por esa canción que sale a su encuentro; las estrellas se van abriendo con humana dulzura: el cielo estrellado se humaniza y entiende el dolor de la Tierra” ‘The coming night becomes maternal on behalf of that song that travels in search of it; the stars open up with human tenderness: the starry sky is humanized and understands the Earth’s pain’ (220). The landscape is thus infused with and participates in the drama/tragedy of human existence.

“El Arte” concludes with “Decálogo del artista,” a section that replicates stylistically and formally the biblical Ten Commandments. Many of these precepts are written as negative commands or statements.⁵¹ Assuming a discourse of negativity, “Decálogo” thereby reinforces the need for poetic “desolation,” for stripping off contingent elements that Mistral considers excessive to the poetic act. This process, indeed embrace, of material poverty or precariousness is regarded as a paradoxical form of strength, one which the preceding section, “El ensueño,” describes by saying,

Y en las grandes catástrofes humanas, cuando los hombres pierden su oro o su esposa, o su amante, que son sus lámparas, solo entonces vendrán a saber que la única rica eras tú, porque con las manos vacías, con el regazo baldío, en tu casa desolada, tendrás el rostro bañado del fulgor de tu lámpara. ¡Y sentirán vergüenza de haberte ofrecido su dicha!

⁵¹ “No hay arte ateo,” “No darás la belleza como cebo para los sentidos,” “No te será pretexto para la lujuria ni para la vanidad,” “No la buscarás en las ferias ni llevarás tu obra a ellas,” “No te será la belleza opio adormecedor” ‘There is no atheist art,’ ‘You will not offer beauty as bait to the senses,’ ‘You will not use it as pretext for lust or vanity,’ ‘You will not seek it in [literary] festivals nor will you bring your work to them,’ ‘Beauty will not be for you an opium for slumber’ (221-22).

And during the great human catastrophes, when the men lose their gold or their wives, or their lovers, which are their lamps, only then will they come to know that you were the only rich one, because with your empty hands, with your barren lap, in your desolate home, you will have your face bathed in the brilliance of your lamp. And they will feel ashamed at having offered you their happiness. (221)

Besides issuing another critique of men's objectification of women—by which the latter are regarded as possessions or commodities (“their gold or their wives”), this fragment criticizes the notion of poetic process as issuing from a catastrophic event that is regarded as both a sudden loss and as the catalyst for an epiphany, presenting in its place a non-evental alternative. Two perspectives of poetic consciousness or awareness are thus presented: on the one hand, one by which a sudden reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) brings about a revelation (suddenly dispossessed of their riches, the men realize, in a flash, that true richness is poverty, something which they recognize by witnessing the speaker condition, albeit too late); on the other hand, the speaker is always already dispossessed; thus she can suffer no *peripeteia* and experience no singular moment of revelation; her continuous dispossession (represented by her “empty hands” and her “desolate home”) is itself a continuous illumination or existence-in-revelation. Revelation, for the speaker, is thus both non-catastrophic and sustained by an ongoing embrace of material lack. The paragraph that precedes the above-quoted one issues a similar critique of revelation, particularly of the religious kind: “Cuando el sacerdote, ebrio de su fe, vaya a hablarte, hallará en tus ojos una ebriedad suave y durable de Dios, y te dirá:—Tú le tienes siempre: en cambio, yo sólo ardo de Él en los momentos del éxtasis” ‘When the priest, drunk with faith, comes to speak with you, he will discover in your eyes a mild and durable

drunkenness of God, and he will say to you: you have Him always: I, on the other hand, only burn with Him in the moments of ecstasy' (221). The priest's experience of the divine is essentially catastrophic ("ecstatic," in his words), which signifies a movement of rupture and recuperation, possession and loss, a relation governed by cyclical crisis; the speaker's experience of the divine, on the other hand, is "mild," which implies that it may lack visibility or spectacle, but is nonetheless ongoing or "durable" ("You have Him always"); a burning approach to the divine, on the one hand; the quietest approach on the other.

Mistral's ambivalent relationship with *modernismo*, her simultaneous praise and critique of its most salient aesthetic principles, opens up the possibility for an equally-ambivalent attitude toward her work on the part of literary critics. Mistral publishes her first book of poems, *Desolación*, in 1922, at a time when, by many accounts, *modernismo*'s force as a guiding movement was already on the decline.⁵² In combining *modernista* precepts with a preoccupation with social engagement, *Desolación* may have seemed out of place, even anachronistic. This possible anachronism may explain—to mention a significant example—Paz's omission of Mistral from his panorama of modern poetry as presented in *Los hijos del limo*. And this because Paz seems primarily concerned with poets of "rupture," with figures that perform a "visible" break with tradition, a gesture that Mistral's work ostensibly "fails" to accomplish. In this respect, Sucre's paraphrase of remarks once made by César Vallejo's are, I believe, applicable to Mistral's apparent lack of novelty: "a

⁵² Satoko Tamura believes that Mistral may have first encountered Darío's *Cantos de vida y esperanza* before *Azul* or *Prosas Profanas*, thereby suggesting that the less ornate *Cantos* may have more strongly influenced Mistral than the other two (117).

poetry that ‘may at first come across as outmoded’ or that ‘does not draw attention to its own modernity or lack thereof,’ could in fact be modern if it is able to translate the interior rhythm, the spirit emanating from a new reality; though less patent, its modernity could be all the more profound” (113).⁵³ While Mistral undoubtedly falls within the influence of *modernismo* in her use of its techniques and themes (concern with form and rhyme, the pervasiveness of a melancholic “sensitivity,” the fascination with death, to mention a few),⁵⁴ her poetry confronts cultural, existential, and philosophical issues appearing in the more formally-experimental works of both the Spanish American avant-garde (César Vallejo, to mention one example) and the high modernism of the English-speaking world (mainly, the poetry of T. S. Eliot).⁵⁵ Although Mistral’s affinity with these arguably more established and internationally-celebrated poets is perhaps more thematic than formal, nothing prevents us from forging a more sustained dialogue amongst them.

Octavio Paz’s influential and persuasive narrative of the development of a modern or “critical” poetic tradition (comprising in his writings the continental

⁵³ Curiously enough, in “Contra el secreto profesional” Vallejo criticizes a number of Latin American poets, including Gabriela Mistral, for practicing a type of unoriginal poetry that merely repeats the aesthetic tenets then in vogue in Latin America: “I have always believed that these labels [referring to the various literary “-isms” of the time] are outside the sphere of art, and that when writers are judged according to these labels, one stumbles upon grotesque confusions and makes horrible mistakes. That José [sic] Luis Borges, for example, exhibits a fervor toward Buenos Aires as false and contagious as is the Latin Americanism of Gabriela Mistral and the cosmopolitanism in vogue amongst all the youngsters in Latin America” (“Contra” 193-94). Hugo Verani indicates that a slightly later version of “Contra el secreto profesional” omits the reference to Mistral (the significance of which is hard to interpret). The modified sentence reads: “I do not ask the poets of Latin America to sing, like Borges, the fervor of Buenos Aires, nor to sing our cosmopolitan destinies, as other youngsters do” (“Contra” 194; footnote).

⁵⁴ For more on Mistral’s relation to *modernismo*, see Augusto Iglesias’s *Gabriela Mistral y el modernismo en Chile*.

⁵⁵ Carmen de Mora observes some links with Spanish-American *creacionismo* and *ultraísmo* in Mistral’s vivid imagery, particularly in the “Naturaleza” section of *Desolación*. See “Mistral y las vanguardias.”

European, British, American, and Latin American contexts) makes a brief mention of Spanish American *posmodernismo* in conjunction with the works of Leopoldo Lugones, Ramón López Velarde, and the Rubén Darío of *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905) (*Children* 96-97).⁵⁶ For Paz, traditional *modernismo* becomes truly modern (that is to say, *critical*) when it becomes fully conscious of its mortality, when, in other words, “behind the make-up of fashion, the grimace of the skull” is glimpsed (96). The intrusion of the knowledge of mortality is also described by Paz as the intrusion of “prose” into poetic discourse, and of “irony” into analogical reflection. Though Paz makes no reference to Gabriela Mistral’s work (nor, for that matter, to the work of many other *posmodernista* poets), the recurrence of “the image of death,” a critical stance with respect to the purported artificiality of *modernismo*, the employment of colloquial language, and a general implementation of an “Aesthetics of the minimal, the near-to-hand, [and] the familiar” (*Children* 96) are all elements recognizable within her poetry and which Paz ascribes to the poetics of *posmodernismo*.⁵⁷

The “critical” mode, so important for Paz’s definition of modernity, is

⁵⁶ Unlike *modernismo*, *posmodernismo* is not a ubiquitous term within Hispanic literary criticism, perhaps due to its even more ambiguous definition. Temporally, *posmodernismo* follows *modernismo* and precedes the Latin American avant-gardes. The term was used in Federico De Onís’s *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana (1882-1932)* to classify a number of poets whose work already prefigured a rupture with the earlier aesthetic, and which included most notably women poets like Delmira Agustini, Alfonsina Storni, and Juana de Ibarbourou, in addition, of course, to Gabriela Mistral (Olivio Jiménez 18).

⁵⁷ In the Introduction to his anthology of *modernista* poetry, José Olivio Jiménez proposes a similar definition: “[*Posmodernismo*] designates, more or less, those poets—all of them hard to situate historically, given the uneven chronological progression of the many Spanish American countries—who, unable to emulate the mastery of their precursors, react by taking up supposedly more humble aesthetic tenets: introspection . . . , the quotidian, attention to modest surroundings (from the home to the family to the neighborhood and province), irony, prosaism, colloquial diction—tenets which had already been explored by the previous generation . . . But in general these new poets do not alter the old, ingrained formal schemas: their precursors’ metric and rhythmic patterns, their rigorous stanzaic structures, even rhymes” (18-19).

recognized in Mistral's work by critics like Guillermo Sucre, who writes: "whether it expresses itself radically or not, shares its motivations and objectives or not, adopts similar forms or not, I nonetheless believe that the critical attitude also appears in the best poets of the transition between *modernismo* and the avant-garde" (59). Situating Mistral between *modernismo*'s apparent lack of self-reflexivity and the avant-garde's radically self-reflexive character, Sucre suggests that her poetry's "differences with respect to *modernismo* start off as 'formal.' Nothing is more alien to her austerity than the refinement, the verbal aristocracy, even the musicality of Darío, as well as the metaphoric intensity and experimentation of Lugones: all of this would have seemed to her a brilliant yet nonetheless slightly 'decadent' form of extravagance" (59-60).⁵⁸

Mistral's critique of *modernismo* confirms the movement's far-reaching impact on the region, even when, as some critics indicate, the Chilean context may have proved the least receptive. Darío's undisputable influence in Latin American literature in general has been thoroughly documented and discussed. His presence within the Chilean literary context, however, is more ambiguous and perhaps not as decisive (curiously, Darío's emblematic *modernista* book, *Azul*, was published in the Chilean port city of Valparaíso in 1888). Although he certainly had admirers and produced a significant number of followers and "imitators," his sojourn in Chile was also accompanied by a great deal of neglect or outright criticism. John M. Fein divides the Chilean *modernista* period into two phases, which constitute themselves around either the presence or absence of the Nicaraguan poet. The first phase encompasses the years 1886-1889, years in which Darío resided in Chile (in the cities of Valparaíso and

⁵⁸ Thorpe Running defines the "critical poem" as one that is concerned with and critical of its own linguistic construction and analyzes a poetic line that develops this topic. See *The critical poem*.

Santiago); the second phase is configured around Darío's absence, that is, once he has left for Buenos Aires—where his presence would be more enthusiastically celebrated and where his poetic influence, both in Argentina and in the American continent at large, would prove more extensive. Following this clear-cut division, Fein recapitulates the trajectory of *modernismo* in Chile by saying that “. . . the first period consisted of a leader without followers, the second of a school without a leader” (12).

In many respects, the second *modernista* period, which develops in Darío's absence, proves more interesting than the first. It is during this period that poets like Francisco Contreras and Carlos Pezoa Véliz begin to publish (the latter's movement away from “aristocratic” themes and towards his own brand of *criollismo* influencing the path which Mistral's own poetry would later take), as well as during which several important literary reviews and magazines emerge, such as *Pluma y lápiz* and *Revista cómica*.⁵⁹ The first *modernista* period showed a tepid reception toward Darío's *Azul*, to the extent that “had [it] not been for the famous letter of Don Juan Valera, reproduced in Chile in January 1889 just before Darío's departure, and later used as the book's preface, *Azul* might have been forgotten for a number of years” (Fein 4).⁶⁰ Few poets were willing to follow Darío's lead, both during his residence in Chile and immediately thereafter.⁶¹ Besides Darío's absence as a leader, the second *modernista*

⁵⁹ For more on these two important journals, see Fein 39-89. The bulk of Fein's book is dedicated to exploring the development of these two literary venues and their influence in shaping and providing direction to this second *modernista* period.

⁶⁰ “Don Antonio Alcalá Miranda, son of the famous Spanish politician of the same name and cousin of don Juan Valera, was Spanish consul in the beautiful city on the Pacific [Valparaíso]. Through him, Darío sent a signed volume of his work to the famed critic and novelist. Valera published his review on the literary section of Madrid's ‘El Imparcial’ [sic], sending the poet two ‘Cartas americanas’ dated 22 and 29 October 1888, respectively” (Olivera Belmás IX-X).

⁶¹ This lack of interest on the part of Chile's poetic scene was in some senses “reciprocated” by Darío after he left the country. “There seems to be no evidence,” Fein states, “that Darío on his own initiative

period in Chile distinguished itself from the first (and perhaps from Spanish-American *modernismo* in general) by its integration of writers of more modest social upbringings. Referencing Domingo Melfi's 1945 study, *El viaje literario*, Fein suggests that "writers did not derive exclusively from the upper classes as they had previously" (13). This more diverse or open social make-up may explain in part the greater "spirit of social awareness" exhibited by emerging poets like Diego Dublé Urrutia, who consistently attempted to portray "the Chilean landscape and its inhabitants."⁶² Mistral's case will follow this pattern as well. As Elizabeth Horan indicates, "Mistral's origins distinguish her from most Chilean writers of the previous century, members of a small Europe-oriented elite. Where their background was essentially aristocratic, she knew the customs, history, religion of a wide group of readers whom she could justly call 'mis chilenos'" (12).

This general movement toward a more "humanitarian poetry" (Fein 27) reflected not only the influence of personal background (lower-class writers actively entering into the literary sphere), but was equally a response to concrete historic situations. On a transnational scale, the consequences of the 1898 Spanish-American War would ripple throughout the Hispanic field, compelling certain authors on both sides of the Atlantic to practice a more socially- and historically-engaged type of writing (in Spain, Miguel de Unamuno and the Generación del 98 would be the

made any attempt to keep in touch with events in Chile subsequent to his departure, either through personal news of his friends or through developments of the literary world" (7).

⁶² "The work of Baldomero Lillo, Guillermo Labarca, Fernando Santiván, Rafael Maluenda, Augusto D'Halmar, and Federico Gana was the foundation of the mighty edifice of criollismo which was to dominate the Chilean literary horizon for many years until the writers of the 1950's began to shout for its demolition" (Fein 24).

paradigmatic examples of this shift).⁶³ More local social developments that impacted the country's literary production, and which took place prior to the Spanish-American War, included social protests called for by the Partido Democrático (founded in 1887) and, years later, protests of a more violent nature in cities like Santiago, Valparaíso, Antofagasta, and Iquique. In addition to this, the country underwent in 1891 a brief yet bloody civil war, which pitted Congress (who had the support of the Navy) against President José Manuel Balmaceda (who had the support of the Army), and which ended with a victorious Congress and with the President's suicide, who preferred to kill himself rather than to surrender (Collier and Sater 154-57). "Indications of depression, unemployment, and financial panic," Fein states, "were widespread in 1897, due in part to the crisis in nitrate production, poor harvests, and heavy defense expenditures" (27). Although the refined aesthetics of *modernismo* by no means disappears (it is in fact prolonged for several more years)⁶⁴, the nineteenth century concludes with a preoccupation on how to account for the abrupt and momentous disruptions in the social field and its actors. As Naín Nómez points out, though starting in 1907 *modernismo* proper became a waning force in Chile, "this does not mean that *modernismo* did not linger as a residual tendency" (37). This being said,

⁶³ Octavio Paz argues that "Spanish *modernismo*—I am thinking primarily of Valle Inclán, Antonio Machado, and Juan Ramón Jiménez—has more than one point of contact with Spanish American *posmodernismo*: criticism of stereotyped attitudes and precious clichés, repugnance toward falsely refined language, reticence toward antiquarian symbolism, search for a pure poetry (Jiménez) or an essential poetry (Machado)" (*Children* 98; translation modified). The two movements would also exhibit clear differences, particularly in what Paz regards as a stronger use of colloquial and conversational idiom on the Spanish American front: "In its early stages Spanish *modernismo* coincided with *posmodernista* reaction against the literary language of Spanish America's first *modernismo*; later this opposition developed into a return to the Spanish poetic tradition: the song, the ballad, the copla" (99; translation modified).

⁶⁴ Fein argues that the "historical conclusion of *modernismo* in Chile began with the demise of *Pluma y lápiz* in 1904," while "the aesthetic conclusion of the movement came in 1908 with the publication of Pedro Prado's first book, *Flores de cardo*," which assumed a more simple discourse and less exotic themes than that of *modernista* poetry.

between 1907 and 1916 “social and popular modes of poetry became accentuated, along with representations of the American landscape and its people. Autochthony is universalized, and there is reaction against exoticism and artifice as part of a search for [the country’s] roots in native customs, peasant origins, and snapshots of urban life” (37-38).

Although poets of the second *modernista* and *posmodernista* phases attempted, as part of a renewed concern with historical and social issues, to incorporate previously marginalized subjects into the scope of poetic representation, in most instances such practices tended toward idealization or aestheticization; in Bernardo Subercaceaux’s useful phrase, these practices also tended toward the construction of “characters at the service of country” (“personajes en función de país” [6]). Writers and poets often assumed a superior position with respect to both the countryside and its population; literature incorporated the land and the peasant, for example, as either objects that embodied a cultural “essence” and thereby demanded preservation, or as objects which the metropolis was obliged to civilize and educate. In the literature of this period, we find, “with few exceptions, characters conditioned by a middle-class gaze (the need to preserve but also to educate rural or indigenous life) or by an elite one (nostalgia for the countryside, serfdom, and for the old values of blood and land” (7).⁶⁵ The geography, particularly the peasant landscape, becomes the space wherein

⁶⁵ Subercaceaux rightly reminds us that this ostensive attempt to be inclusive of marginalized subjects nonetheless perpetuated a masculine position: the marginal Other now included within literary space was in most cases a middle-aged man (peasant or city worker). Writers used the figures of the *huaso* and of the *roto* (Chileanisms for *peasant* and *low-class urban-dweller*, respectively) as emblems of the nation’s racial and cultural origins: “The *roto* and the *huaso*, in all their variants and characteristics, expose—as icons of “chileanness”—the patriarchal and gender partiality proper to nationalism” (11). One of the original contributions of Mistral’s work was to have attempted to correct this imbalance by incorporating women, children, and even animals as the main protagonists of her lyric community.

“are preserved . . . customs and habits not yet wiped out by modernity” (19). Though writing within and from the metropolis, the writers of this period find themselves disenchanted by the ethic and moral disintegration they claim to witness in the city, thereby imbuing the land with a “moral valuation” that situates rural space on a higher “virtuous” plane than that of the city (20).

Among the poets that prolong the tradition/modernity dichotomy Subercaceaux mentions the work of Carlos Pezoa Véliz, whose poem “Alma Chilena” (published in a book of poems of the same title [1912]) represents an example of the metropolitan poet’s exaltation of subjects and customs that embody a kind of authentic national identity precisely because they are in some way distanced from the “center.” This exaltation is represented in “Alma Chilena” by the port of Valparaíso, where people from the countryside find work in the ship industry all the while retaining their former way of life. Subercaceaux calls this invisible group laboring in the night “the lost community” (26).⁶⁶ Though Pezoa Véliz’s “Alma Chilena” (not to mention his other poems) is much more complex than what my summary suggests, it has predictably been interpreted from viewpoints that replicate the hierarchic relation between lettered and non-lettered subjects. In his *Estudios de literatura chilena* (1938), for instance, Melfi describes Pezoa Véliz as a “discoverer” of the outside, of that territory that lies beyond the metropolis (“he accompanied with his fierce song the discoverers of the countryside” [119]), and which the emerging *criollista* poets began to “make more

⁶⁶ Examples of similar reimaginings of this lost community may be found in the work of Diego Dublé Urrutia (*Del mar a la montaña* [1903]) and Samuel Lillo (*Canciones de arauco* [1908]), both of whom, contrary to Pezoa Véliz, conceive this community as essentially alienated from the modern sector; nonetheless, their speakers envision a “tomorrow” in which ancient and modern cultures will be reconciled (Subercaceaux 24-25). Additional *criollista* poets who enjoyed a significant popularity in their time include Magallanes Moure (*Facetas* [1902], *Matices* [1904], *La jornada* [1910]), and Antonio Bórquez Solar (*Campo lírico* [1900]) (Fein 24, 30).

familiar” (“hicieron más familiar”) for city-dwellers (118). Melfi sees in Pezoa Véliz’s work a productive and invigorating rejection of *modernista* decadence and a turn towards a poetics of pain and suffering that emerges out of an identification with peasant and proletarian life. “There was in Pezoa a consciousness and a religion of pain,” Melfi indicates, and goes on to say that

Only at this cost was it possible for him to understand and identify with the anonymous people of the countryside and of the city. Had that image not touched his heart of poet, he would have felt nothing save that indifference that is habitual in those who, referring the shameful conditions suffered by those who live under injustice and exploitation, are only concerned with writing literature. (137)

Subercaceaux, for his part, rejects the idea that Pezoa Véliz replicates fixed stereotypes and dichotomies, arguing that “the tension between country and city, tradition and modernity, is more fluid and dialectical than in other authors” (27). Less inclined to interpret the subjects appearing in his poems as “characters at the service of country,” Pezoa Véliz casts a gaze that is “more realistic than ideological”; if Pezoa Véliz affirms the reality or promise of national identity, such identity is not necessarily imposed on the land and its inhabitants, but is rather created through their mutual interaction as well as through their interaction with the poetic observer; an identity, in other words, “fluid, not fossilized, realistically displayed throughout the course of the poem, and which does not obey an abstract, preconceived notion nor a cultural purism that separates the peasant and popular spheres from other social environments” (Subercaceaux 27).

It is feasible to imagine Pezoa Véliz’s impetus to create a more “humanitarian poetry”—a poetry that would attempt to represent (without falling into an outright

nationalist or aesthetic appropriation) marginalized groups and spaces—as having an impact on the *posmodernista* poets that would soon follow, among which Mistral is generally included. In his prose writings, Pezoa Véliz forcefully affirms that “a poet will be that person who makes his verses with the soul’s tatters, with the flag’s shreds, with hungry flesh” (qtd. in Fein 26).⁶⁷ He reiterates poetry’s engagement with those who are *lacking* (in food, shelter, political representation, property, and so on), describing these subjects in terms that would later be echoed by Mistral—whose entire poetry, both thematically and stylistically, may be said to embody and represent a poetics of *dispossession*. Pezoa Véliz insists that

If the poet speaks of water with the water’s voice, let him also speak of those who thirst . . . If he wants to confide his problems to the landscape, let him also speak from the rotten door of the miserable ranch, with its ruined walls, rosebushes, and hopes . . . Let him sing to the wind that carries the pollen, life’s principle, and to the cry of the disinherited, death’s principle. (qtd. in Fein 26)

This shift from the “ivory tower” to “humanitarianism” is of course visible within *modernismo* itself, most notably in Darío’s own trajectory as a poet, which leads him to publish in 1905 his famed *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, wherein he critiques his “former self” in the opening poem with the lines: “Yo soy aquel que ayer no más decía / el verso azul y la canción profana” ‘I am the one who yesterday uttered / the blue verse and the profane song’ (*Azul* 113). *Modernista* traits, in other words, can be found well after the “demise” of *modernismo* proper; likewise, *posmodernista* and even avant-garde features already figure in poets typically catalogued as

⁶⁷ “Tatters,” “shreds,” “flesh”: refuse and matter. Pezoa Véliz’s choice of vocabulary anticipates Pablo Neruda’s *ars poetica* as expressed particularly in his early work (*Residencia en la tierra*) and in programmatic prose texts such as “Sobre una poesía sin pureza” and “Conducta y poesía.”

modernistas.⁶⁸

This stylistic and thematic syncretism may be found in Mistral's poetry as well, for example in what Jaime Concha calls Mistral's "macabrisms" and in its fascination with the Other's death. Alluding to Mario Praz's notion of "romantic agony," Concha finds a "vein of poetization that likes to imagine the material dissolution of the lover's body" (63-64). Allusions or overt references to cadavers, sepulchers, funerary urns, and tombs are easily encountered throughout her work. Despite this obvious influence, death and dying in Mistral is not represented in the aestheticized manner characteristic of *modernista* decadence, but with the austerity and asceticism proper to the landscapes and subjects that she seeks to represent. Concha explains this visually as a movement from the "cold niche" [*nicho helado*] to the "communal grave" [*communal grave*], a movement already apparent in the poetry of Pezoa Véliz,⁶⁹ and which Mistral explicitly advocates in the "Sonetos de la muerte" in reference to the preferred burial place of the dead character inspiring the speaker's lament: "Del nicho helado en que los hombres te pusieron, / te bajaré a la tierra humilde y soleada" 'Down from the cold niche in which the men placed you, / I will take you to the humble and sunny earth' (*Desolación* 124).

⁶⁸ Perhaps the most obvious example of a *modernista/avant-garde* poet is the Argentine Leopoldo Lugones. Read alongside his contemporaries' works, Lugones's *Lunario sentimental* (1909) is extremely innovative, both formally and thematically. In Gwen Kirkpatrick's words: "The *Lunario*'s hardened edges, its ironies, and its jolting juxtapositions not only prefigure vanguardist techniques and themes but also make the reader reflect on poetry's previous presentations. Its images of the city, the machine, the inclusion of the middle class, its vision of the dehumanization of human activities, mark a turning point in the diction and topics of Spanish American poetry" (356). Similarly, Paz argues that "*Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905) and *Lunario sentimental* (1909) are the two major works of *modernismo*'s second period; from them emerge, directly or indirectly, all experiences and experiments of modern poetry written in Spanish" ("El caracol" 153).

⁶⁹ Concha refers specifically to Pezoa Véliz's "Entierro de campo," a poem in which a subject on horseback observes from afar and describes a humble burial taking place in the countryside. This poem is included in *Alma Chilena* (66).

At least three important works that evoke in one way or another a poetic landscape of desolation, desertedness, or waste see the light of day in the year 1922: Mistral's aforementioned *Desolación*, César Vallejo's *Trilce*, and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.⁷⁰ Although their worldviews and poetic trajectories cannot, of course, be reduced to a common cultural or poetic vision, they nonetheless all share a critical attitude towards what they perceive as the "spiritual barrenness" of modern society.

Modernism, the Avant-Garde, and Religious Barrenness

Vallejo's *Trilce* is a linguistically-experimental work typically situated within the Hispanic avant-garde tradition, and, in some cases, regarded as its very inaugurator.⁷¹ Like Mistral's singular brand of *posmodernista* humanism, Vallejo seeks to distance himself from the formalist perfection and thematic exoticism of traditional *modernismo*, attempting instead to convey, through jarring and at times disorienting linguistic experimentation, the estrangement and pain of human existence.⁷² Mauricio Ostria González establishes further links between the two poets:

⁷⁰ Although I only highlight these three works, 1922 was a much more significant year in terms of literary and non-literary output. In Hugo Verani's recount, "1922 was an *annus mirabilis* in world history: on this year were published, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, W. B. Yeats's *Later Poems*, Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*, D.H. Lawrence's *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, e.e cummings's *The enormous room*, Paul Valéry's *Charmes*, Henri Bergson's *Durée et simultanéité*, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, Bertolt Brecht's *Baal*, Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, Luigi Pirandello's *Enrico IV* (Introducción 11). In the Hispanic world, Juan Ramón Jiménez's immensely influential *Segunda antología poética*—a summa of his lyric output from 1898 to 1918—also came out that year, as well as Oliverio Girondo's *Poemas para ser leídos en un tranvía*. For a study that focuses on the significance of this year in the Anglo-American and European contexts, see North.

⁷¹ Pablo Neruda would not publish *Tentativa del hombre infinito* until 1926, and his *Residencia en la tierra* would not come out until 1933. Vicente Huidobro is of course the other inaugurator of the Spanish-American avant-garde; his *El espejo de agua* was published in 1916.

⁷² Vallejo's previous poetry collection, *Los heraldos negros* (1918), is still very much indebted, both stylistically and thematically, to *modernismo*: "Vallejo's early poetry draws directly on Darío's

in addition to grounding their scenarios primarily on peasant life (194), both exhibit an aversion toward urban space (195), a space from which their characters are in constant flight. The theme of infancy also appears in both poets: in Mistral, children, along with feminine figures, appear as characters marginalized from the social center and from the hegemonic paradigm of literary representation (which either excluded them outright or incorporated them in an objectifying fashion). Vallejo makes infancy constitutive of the human condition and sees an orphaned creature in every human being (196).

Speaking of *Trilce* as a work infused by a sense of desolation, Sucre highlights its affective charge while specifying that affect is here restrained by “rigor” and “austerity” (115); he describes Vallejo’s poetry as a disillusioned critique of “the barrenness of the contemporary world” (117), and *Trilce*, in particular, “is dominated by a sense of barren man [*el hombre desértico*]: his time is a ‘stagnant’ present (II), and the ‘parched today’ is sterile (XXVII); suffering is his ultimate reality: ‘Another *ay* [woe] has triumphed. Therein lies the truth’ (LXXIII)” (123).⁷³ Pain and disillusionment stem in part from the uneasy and tortuous relation which Vallejo’s speakers sustain with a distant, cold, and even hurtful God. From the God of “*Los dados eternos*,” who shows great indifference towards the world, to the God of “*Los*

symbolist aesthetic, nuanced by inflections of Peruvian poets of his time: Abraham Valdelomar’s *modernismo*, respectful of Catholicism; José María Eguren’s dreamy symbolism, with nods to the German lyrical tradition; and the anticlerical anarchist virility of Manuel González Prada. As André Coyne and Américo Ferrari have shown, Vallejo was also influenced by the poetry of two Latin American contemporaries: the Uruguayan José Herrera y Reissig and the Argentine Leopoldo Lugones” (Kristal 6-7).

⁷³ Poems in *Trilce* are ordered by Roman numerals. In this same section, Sucre makes a brief comparison between *Trilce*’s “*hombre desértico*” and Eliot’s “hollow man” (122).

heraldos negros,” who expresses outright hatred towards it,⁷⁴ Vallejo’s position toward the Christian divinity is one of constant struggle, doubt, fury, but also devotion and even hope. His anger towards the divine is also a passion, a profession of faith. Thus, for Paz “Vallejo was a great religious poet. A militant Communist, the background of his vision of the world and of his beliefs was not the critical philosophy of Marxism but the basic mysteries of the Christianity of his childhood and of his race: communion, transubstantiation, longing for immortality” (*Children* 155). If for Vallejo human existence is primarily a cruel “error,” a journey plagued with obstacles and disappointment, this tragic condition does not foreclose the possibility for the emergence of human relation and solidarity. Vallejo in fact proposes an ethics grounded on pain and suffering, an ethics that emerges all the stronger precisely because subjects are wounded and because, wounded, they must seek each other and mend each other’s suffering. As Sucre indicates, “it is only possible *to speak of hope* in its absence” (118; author’s emphasis), of joy and solidarity if not from a position wherein these conditions are missing. The “stoicism” of his poetry “never turns into resignation,” but in fact produces the opposite effect: “the will to change: to change the world or history” (131). Lack and weakness can paradoxically emerge as conditions that bind community and as positive agents of human conversion: “Dispossession . . . can be a form of possession (already a poem in *Trilce* claimed: ‘we will cover ourselves with the gold of not having anything’ [‘nos cubriremos con el oro

⁷⁴ “Dios mío, si tú hubieras sido hombre, / hoy supieras ser Dios; / pero tú, que estuviste siempre bien, no sientes nada de tu creación” ‘My God had you been a man, / today you would know how to be God; / but you, who were always fine, / feel nothing for your own creation’ (*The Complete* 134-35); “Hay golpes en la vida, tan fuertes . . . ¡Yo no sé! / Golpes como del odio de Dios; como si ante ellos, / la resaca de todo lo sufrido / se empozara en el alma . . . ¡Yo no sé!” ‘There are blows in life, so powerful . . . I don’t know! / Blows as from the hatred of God; as if, facing them, / the undertow of everything suffered / welled up in the soul . . . I don’t know!’ (*The Complete* 24).

de no tener nada'] and poverty, by virtue of its helplessness, is the highest expression of humanity and even of corporeality (131). In this sense, Vallejo echoes the paradoxical claim issued in Mistral's "El arte," which sees dispossession and weakness as forms of strength and harbingers of promise.

While Vallejo wrestles with the Christian tradition and struggles to relate with whom he perceives as a vengeful God, he never abandons the hope of a religious redemption. As Kristal points out, "Vallejo does not attack the institutions of the Church. Instead, he deploys the very concepts and categories of Catholic dogma in quarreling with his waning Christian faith" (11). Vallejo, as many critics have suggested, paints a "tragic" vision of humanity; but this tragedy is at all times infused with religious significance, one in which "salvation and sin are one and the same" (Kristal 11), but also in which the possibility of salvation is never entirely out of reach. In retaining the hope of a religious redemption (however unorthodox or non-dogmatic its form may take), Vallejo expresses a desire similar to the one expressed in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*—a poem which, as mentioned above, is contemporary to both *Trilce* and *Desolación*.

If, as suggested by Sucre, Vallejo portrays "barren man" in conjunction with the "parched today," Eliot gives form to analogous figures in "the hollow men" and in "the dead land" which they inhabit.⁷⁵ But the emptiness and infertility of "The Hollow Men" (1925) is already the main outlook behind *The Waste Land*, which according to M. L. Rosenthal represents a vision of "the negative modern landscape"

⁷⁵ "This is the dead land / This is cactus land / Here the stone images / Are raised, here they receive / The supplication of a dead man's hand / Under the twinkle of a fading star" (*Collected* 80).

(88).⁷⁶ The representation of this modern landscape is complimented by a powerful desire to arrest fragmentation and decay. “A quest for stability is central in Eliot’s work,” Michael Schmidt argues, “and the early poems evoke the very instabilities and discontinuities from which the later writings seek to extricate him. The social and personal agony of *The Waste Land* and the individual agony of ‘Prufrock’ are responses to instability, and the poet could not have stayed in that place for long without self-destructing” (604). It would be impossible to discuss here the thematic and formal complexity and the multiple interpretations that Eliot’s poem has inspired. For my purposes, I simply wish to remark that a similar movement from barrenness to the *possibility* of rebirth, from desolation to the *possibility* of consolation (with the religious implications that *desolatio* and *consolatio* possess) is surmised in Eliot’s poem as it is in Vallejo’s and Mistral’s work.

Although Eliot’s religious convictions will become more pronounced in later poems such as “Ash Wednesday” (1930) and *Four Quartets* (1935-42), *The Waste Land* already points to a desire to attain stability through a religious, or at least “spiritual,” discovery. “Eliot’s hero-sensibility wanders over the parched ‘waste land’ of a secularized existence,” Rosenthal suggests, while Robert Langbaum, speaking of Eliot’s earlier and subsequent work, indicates that his poems “. . . set forth successive positions on the road to faith—first, the recognition of the waste land of irreligion in *Gerontion*, *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*, and then in *Journey of the Magi*, *A Song for Simeon* and *Marina*, the recognition of what must be believed in although the speaker still lacks the capacity to go all the way in believing” (94). Langbaum further

⁷⁶ Grover Smith also suggests that “Although ‘The Hollow Men’ is not a mere appendage to *The Waste Land*, it may most profitably be read as an extension of the same design of quest and failure” (104).

argues that the “longing for death,” which he observes in Eliot’s incorporation of “primitive vegetation myths,”⁷⁷ “is a longing for renewal and, if the reader wants to carry the analogy a step farther, a longing for redemption through the blood of Christ, the slain God” (104). The last section of Eliot’s poem, “What the Thunder Said,” concludes by reference to a figure from Arthurian legend known as the Fisher King.⁷⁸ In the legend, he is portrayed as a wounded ruler whose impotence and infertility is transferred onto his kingdom, such that the land itself becomes barren and desolate. In Eliot’s poem, we hear him saying “I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?” (69). The Fisher King’s desire to set his “lands in order,” to restore their generative potential, is accomplished in the legends by the arrival of a travelling knight. Hugh Kenner reads the hope of regeneration implied in this outcome as a call to overcome modern, solipsistic existence and to reestablish some kind of communion with things through curiosity and inquiry:

The quester arrived at the Chapel Perilous had only to ask the meaning of the things that were shown him. Until he has asked their meaning, they have none; after he has asked, the king’s wound is healed and the waters commence again to flow. So in a civilization reduced to a ‘heap of broken images’ all that is requisite is sufficient curiosity; the man who asks what one or another of these fragments means . . . may be the agent of regeneration. (24)

In asking for the “meaning” of “things,” the agent of regeneration performs an act of

⁷⁷ An example of this interest towards vegetation myths/fertility rites may be found in “The Burial of the Dead”: “There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: ‘Stetson! / You who were with me in the ships of Mylae! / That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?’” (55). Establishing a connection between the god’s sacrifice in vegetation myths with Eliot’s idea of the poet’s “extinction of personality,” Gregory S. Jay argues that the relevance of these ceremonies lay in the fact that they “dramatize an identification of the god with the life of the people who recurrently slay him in the name of fertility. The god’s resurrection and the nation’s rejuvenation culminate another restricted economy of the *Aufhebung*, in which castration and death are the *via negativa* of potency and life” (116).

⁷⁸ Eliot’s source for this myth is Jessie L. Weston’s 1920 book *From Ritual to Romance* (Eliot 75).

analogy by which the “heap of broken images” becomes a meaningful structure of interrelated signs. Following Paz, we may say that *The Waste Land* is traversed by the forces of irony (which tears the “land” apart) and of analogy (which attempts to place it back in order). In reference to Pound’s *Cantos* and Eliot’s poem, Paz had already claimed that “analogy is continuously torn apart by criticism, by ironic consciousness” (*Children* 149). More generally, he suggests that while “the European avant-garde exalts the aesthetic of the exception, Eliot wants to reintegrate the religious exception—the Protestation separation—into the Christian order of Rome, and Pound tries to insert within a universal order the historical peculiarity which is the United States” (146). In attempting to account for the “exception,” to place it within a meaningful framework (either historical or literary), both poets, for Paz, attempt to contain the effects of ironic rupture. Nonetheless, Eliot’s response is more partial to a religious revitalization than is Pound’s: “In the face of the modern crisis, both poets turn their eyes to the past and actualize history: every epoch is this epoch. But Eliot actually desires to return and to reinstall Christ; Pound uses the past as another form of the future . . . Unlike Eliot, he is a reactionary, not a conservative” (Paz, *The Bow* 66-67).

The Waste Land may thus be seen in part as a response to a process of secularization that produces the negative effects fragmentation, isolation, and incommunication on both subjects and societies. While Eliot would view his context as one permeated by secular disorder, his poem would propose that “the historical image of spiritual order [be] medieval Christian society” (Paz, *Children* 37). Thus, if *The Waste Land* is formally a “revolutionary poem” (one which “irrigated” the

Western poetic landscape and made it incredibly “fertile”), it is also a poem suffused with a strong longing to reinstate some kind of historical and existential order—such that “revolutionary” would have to be read here in its original sense: as a return to a former state or condition.⁷⁹ This is what drives Paz to conclude that *The Waste Land*’s theme “is not simply the description of the gelid modern world, but the nostalgia for a universal order whose model is the Christian order of Rome” (*The Bow* 64).⁸⁰

Generally speaking, Eliot’s desolate poem may be said to reproduce a movement from desolation to consolation (in its own words, from “April is the cruellest month” to “Shantih shantih shantih”).⁸¹ In a similar way, Mistral’s first book portrays various scenes of desolation but concludes with a note of peace or hope infused with a spiritual tone.⁸² I am referring to the final prose piece titled “Voto,” which may be read as yet another articulation of Mistral’s *ars poetica* and—as she

⁷⁹ Originally, and keeping to its roots within astronomical discourse (where it was used to describe the rotation of celestial bodies), revolution signified a process by which an old order was reinstated. In reference to the English context, in which the term was first employed in a socio-political fashion (as *revolution mundana*), Griewank states that “The Great Revolution of the seventeenth century (a term which may be used to designate the whole course of development from the outbreak of the Great Rebellion in 1640 to the Glorious Revolution of 1688) has often been made the basis of a cyclical conception of revolutions, following Polybus’s old cyclical theory of constitutions: from the collapse of monarchy and aristocracy through a more and more democratic republic to military dictatorship and eventually back to monarchy” (14).

⁸⁰ Similarly: “The ghost of Rome prevails in *The Waste Land* because Rome evolved from the greatest of Western empires into a Christian one; because the various European empires that followed Rome, all the way down to the British Empire, retained something of this inheritance, including the association of church and state (at least, officially); and because Eliot at the time of *The Waste Land* sees the possibility that this inheritance and this association will come to an end in the disintegration of church and state and civilization as we know them” (Cook 84).

⁸¹ Eliot’s note to this final verse reads: “Shantih. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. ‘The peace which passeth understanding’ is our equivalent to this word” (76). On a related note, Eliot’s “April is the cruellest month” may be said to find its parallel in Mistral’s “La tierra a la que vine no tiene primavera” (*Desolación* 155).

⁸² Jaime Concha indicates that “la ‘desolación’ se ve ligada a la desesperación y a la posibilidad del suicidio. Y esto indica—sea dicho de una vez por todas—que el título del primer libro de la Mistral conlleva en sí una noción religiosa, muy reiterada en el lenguaje ignaciano (figura en los *Ejercicios espirituales*, donde constituye el opuesto negativo de la *consolatio* divina) y que conoció seguramente la Mistral a través de sus lecturas de Santa Teresa” (65).

herself proposes—in conjunction with “Decálogo del Artista”:

Dios me perdone este libro amargo y los hombres que sienten la vida como dulzura me lo perdonen también.

En estos cien poemas queda sangrando un pasado doloroso, en el cual la canción se ensangrentó para aliviarme. Lo dejo tras de mí como a la hondonada sombría y por las laderas más clementes subo hacia las mesetas espirituales donde una ancha luz caerá, por fin, sobre mis días. Yo cantaré desde ellas las palabras de la esperanza, sin volver a mirar mi corazón; cantaré como lo quiso un misericordioso, para ‘consolar a los hombres.’ A los treinta años, cuando escribí el “Decálogo del Artista”, dije este Voto.

Dios y la Vida me dejen cumplirlo en los días que me quedan por los caminos. (*Desolación* 252)

“Voto” conceives of poetic creation as, first, emerging from pain and, second, as providing a kind of therapeutic relief for both the poet and her readers/listeners. The poet finds herself on a landscape of suffering, which gives rise to her song. The acts of singing and of wandering through the landscape (“laderas clementes”) constitute purgative experiences. The hope (expressed in those actions narrated in the future tense), is to arrive at a “higher” place (“las mesetas espirituales”) where the poet will exchange shadow for light, suffering for relief. Importantly, the poet has not yet arrived at such a place, but is merely on her way there. Both the former poems and the current “Voto” issue at all times from the space of desolation. Though the poet, speaking in a prophetic tone, tells us that she will one day sing “the words of hope,” she never tells us what such words would be. The future song of consolation appears, that is, not in the content or presence of its words, but in the merely formal and spectral outline of its coming. Had the actual content of these words of hope been revealed, the speaker would have issued a prescription for desolation; instead, in being “revealed” through their most basic appellation, as mere *palabras* (precisely *which ones* is the refusal we encounter), “Voto” remains an evocation of hope rather than a

narration of its arrival; it describes a promise, as yet unrealized, of consolation rather than its actual fulfillment. In this sense, when Jaime Concha says that “*Desolación*—literal y explícitamente—es el camino entre una vida de signo desolado y una esperanza que nunca llega a cristalizar” (67-68), he is in fact thinking of “Voto” and, I may add, of its refusal to “crystalize” the notion of hope by concretizing and immobilizing it in an apprehensible phrase. Ana María Cuneo’s interpretation is likewise open to the positive ambiguity and to the affirmative nature of the message’s non-arrival implicit in this text:

“Voto”—the word that titles this text—signifies a religious oath by means of which man pledges himself to a future action which, in the text we are commenting, consists in singing the words of hope, in becoming a prophet who tells mankind of his transcendental destiny.

What will be said to mankind is not something defined or certain, but the intuited sketch of a desired good, a good aspired to not because of a personal sense of responsibility, but out of a sense of community amongst men. It is not something attained as a result of one’s action, but something that is received. What man contributes is the disposition for this to happen. (29)

In her reading, Cuneo reminds us of the religious, indeed Christian, inflection of this piece, an inflection which may be said to permeate the entirety of Mistral’s first book as well as her subsequent poetic output. I agree with Guillermo Sucre’s statement that “All of Mistral’s work is dominated by a Christic passion [*pasión crística*]” (60), and I would like to devote the remainder of this chapter to pursuing this religious vein and to exploring the ways in which it shapes community’s imagining in key poems.

Community in Christ’s Desolation

While the ideas that Mistral expresses as a pedagogue, politician, and overall intellectual regarding society’s relation to religion (her demand that societies be

religious in nature, to take one example) may come across as highly conservative,⁸³ I regard the ideas that a *certain* Mistral articulates in *certain* poems (there is undoubtedly more than one Mistral) to be much more provocative inasmuch as they ascribe to a less orthodox conception of religious exercise; because, to be more precise, they emphasize the non-triumphant and precarious aspects of Christ's passion (his *utter* desolation), and therefore the radically painful and fragile aspects of religious devotion and communion as subjects attempt to relate to his image. This "contradiction" between poetic personae and real-life author and their respective utterances is perhaps inherent to literary criticism as such; but in Mistral's case it is all the more prevalent inasmuch as she herself promoted a certain disjunction or non-equivalence between the two.⁸⁴ The ideas that each expresses may be thus contradictory but not necessarily self-contradictory, since they are uttered by at least two different personae. I would therefore like to pay note to Santiago Daydí-Tolson's observation that "We must not forget that Gabriela Mistral is a pseudonym, an alternative name, a literary invention. It designates a person who is in no small part

⁸³ In a letter to Eduardo Barrios, Mistral expresses her outrage towards what she perceives as the religious emptiness of modern societies: "I think that today's lack of [religious] belief will bring about a regression into barbarism. I observe with desperation the atheism that takes hold of men's education ["educación masculina fiscal"]. I will not join conservative groups in their protests against official education; but I know that their anger possesses an element of truth; I don't know what kind of crime one commits when one instills doubt in a child. Killing or maiming him/her would be better. Mutilation it is. I am absolutely convinced that an areligious man is an incomplete man and that ardent faith is the soul's wine. I justify wholeheartedly fanaticism, as much as I praise passionate people" ("Carta"29). Nonetheless, in this same text Mistral argues that each culture ("race," in her terms) chooses its religious system, thereby admitting that Christianity is not necessarily the "correct" faith: "Each race must possess its own form of religion. Hindi people, who often incline towards physical debilitation, become throughout the course of generations the peaceful instruments of a supra-human cult, that is, of a cult at the limits of the human" (30).

⁸⁴ "With regard to the creation of a persona, Mistral seems to have been aware of herself, of her apparent inconsistencies, even to the point of consciously cultivating and throwing them down before her readers from the very start" (Horan 46). For Horan, these intentional contradictions become exemplified in Mistral's expression, "I am modest to the point of humility and proud to the point of arrogance," a phrase that seemingly unites contradictory traits (modesty and arrogance) in one person. See Horan 46-48.

imaginary” (611). He adds that

The complex mistralian poetic “I”—a profound voice modulated differently by each mask—is composed of a diversity of distinct profiles which, in a more or less veiled manner, reproduce in the representation of lyric personae (each of which possesses a clearly metaphoric or symbolic character) various characteristics proper to the real person that was the writer. (612-13)

Having said this, I would like to turn my attention to Mistral’s thoughts on the importance of religion within society as expressed in some of her prose writings, which in some cases parallel those expressed in her poetry. Subsequently, I will turn to some specific poems where I see the link between religion and community articulated from the perspective of fragility.

In his introduction to Gabriela Mistral’s *Prosa religiosa*, Luis Vargas Saavedra reiterates Mistral’s lifelong commitment to a religious vocation, as well as her ongoing attempts to make of the religious a catalyst for positive social change.⁸⁵ This concern is emblemized early on in Mistral’s 1924 speech to the Unión Panamericana, where she states that “I am not an artist; what I am is a woman in whom stirs the vital desire to infuse in my race (as it has happened within myself), a religiosity combined with an intense yearning for social justice” (qtd. in Vargas Saavedra 9). In “Cristianismo con sentido social,” (also from 1924), Mistral similarly

⁸⁵ It may be pertinent to mention here the possible influence of Italian poet Ada Negri on Mistral’s poetry as well as on her position regarding the role of religion in the public sphere. The daughter of socialist workers, Negri, like Mistral, was nevertheless resolutely Catholic. She became quite popular in Latin America in the early decades of the twentieth century. Her poems were translated by various *modernista* authors, including the Colombian Guillermo Valencia, who perceived a “sacred” element in her portrayals of proletariat subjects undergoing unspeakable suffering; this made it possible for her work to be recovered and appropriated by the Catholic conservative camp of the Latin American “lettered city.” In a similar way, Mistral’s work was conveniently appropriated by a conservative strain of literary criticism, who, basing their readings on biographical evidence and on a locatable sexual identity, celebrated her work as the sublime expression of a material pathos and of a feminine pedagogical inclination, thus incorporating her work into the general socio-political project of imagining a unified, healthy, and civilized nation. An encounter between Gabriela Mistral and Ada Negri, which took place in Milan, is described by Mistral in a brief text titled “Con Ada Negri.”

argues in favor of the inclusion of religious faith within the political realm, although she does not specify what the exact nature of such a relationship would be: “Faith in Christ was, both during Roman times and in today’s world, a doctrine of equality amongst men, that is, a norm for collective life, *a politics* (let us once in a while ennoble this tarnished word) (37; emphasis added).⁸⁶ At any rate, and like many writers and intellectuals of her time, Mistral perceived the modern world as negatively transformed by an increasing secularization of the social and political spheres, which rendered individuals and their societies vulnerable to subjective disenchantment and to a collective sense of nihilism. Mistral’s *modernista* precursors likewise perceived the withdrawal of the divine but reacted in a radically different manner, assuming a “blasphemous” attitude that may be said to have overlooked the fact that the Christian, and in particular the catholic, message was empty, devoid of substance, and instead focused its attention on the outward manifestation (the pure form) of religious ritual. Influenced by decadentism and parnassianism, *modernismo* was attracted to and hence emphasized the luxurious, sensual, and excessive components of Catholic ceremony and iconography. More than its content, what attracted them was the performativity and theatricality of Christian symbolism.⁸⁷ As the secular bourgeoisie paradoxically

⁸⁶ It would be interesting to compare Mistral’s text with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical-letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which is considered by many to be a direct precursor of the twentieth century party ideology of “democracia cristiana.” The encyclical’s argument goes more or less like this: you plutocrats should be smart and not abuse your poor workers. If you treat these wretched workers a little more gently, in keeping with the Christian doctrine of brotherly love, they won’t espouse anarchism or communism because deep at heart what they long for is not revolution, but reconciliation, sustaining themselves with the faint hope that their lot on earth will improve through belief in God.

⁸⁷ While the *modernista* poet focused his gaze on the visibly-ostentatious objects of catholic ceremony, Mistral may be said to have followed the principle that regards “things without honor” as the preferred conduits of divine “truths.” In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas provides the standard defense of “lowly” creatures and things. Arguing that it is fitting for “sacred science [to] use metaphors” and “comparisons with material things,” Aquinas speaks of the particular advantage that humble objects hold with respect to more beautiful ones: “As Dionysius says, (Coel. Hier. i) it is more fitting that

deified science and technology, and the military and patriotic sectors of society sacralized the motherland, artists turned again to religion as the realm of experience in which the beautiful object retained its liturgical power and therefore remained also somewhat “sacred.” *Modernismo*’s dismissal of the redemptive content of Christian ideology was a symptom of a prevalent disbelief in divine (Christian or otherwise) salvation:

Habían muerto todos los dioses, toda forma de entidad trascendente que diese apoyo a la debilidad humana y que explicase el sentido de la vida y el mundo. Había muerto el Dios de cualquier ortodoxia religiosa confesional; pero también el dios sustitutivo de la ciencia, proclamado por el positivismo, y que poco había ayudado a resolver o paliar aquella orfandad esencial del hombre. Y este quedaría abandonado así a su propia merced; solo ante el misterio, vacío del mundo y, al cabo, vacío de sí.

All gods had died, all manners of a transcendental entity that would ground human weakness and explain the meaning of life and of the world. The God linked to a confessional, religious orthodoxy had died; but also the substitute god of science hailed by positivism, and which had done little to undo or assuage man’s essential orphanhood. Man would thus be left to his mercy, alone against the mystery and emptiness of the world, which reflected his own emptiness. (Jiménez 22)

Finding herself amidst this atmosphere of religious vacuity, disenchantment, and perhaps even “profanity,” Mistral expresses desperately in a letter to Ricardo Michel Abos-Padilla (dated 1919) the imperative to redeem the world through a transformative conversion that, importantly, need not be necessarily a Christian one, but which could in fact be accomplished by an atheist force: “Ricardo, the world needs

divine truths should be expounded under the figure of less noble than of nobler bodies, and this for three reasons. Firstly, because thereby men’s minds are the better preserved from error. For then it is clear that these things are not literal descriptions of divine truths, which might have been open to doubt had they been expressed under the figure of nobler bodies, especially for those who could think of nothing nobler than bodies. Secondly, because this is more befitting the knowledge of God that we have in this life. For what He is not is clearer to us than what He is. Therefore similitudes drawn from things farthest away from God form within us a truer estimate that God is above whatsoever we may say or think of Him. Thirdly, because thereby divine truths are the better hidden from the unworthy.” (Question 1, Article 9)

to be redeemed, it does not matter who or what accomplishes this. Be it Buddhism or Islam, masonry or atheism, that is a minor issue. The important thing is that the world be born into a new world” (qtd. in Vargas Saavedra 11). As evidenced by this quote, Mistral does not restrict religious experience to the Christian framework, but is in fact open to an understanding of “redemption” from a variety of perspectives and traditions. Regarding her own religious convictions, Mistral may be said to have adhered to a Christian ideology that was nonetheless infused by concepts from various belief systems, perhaps most notably Buddhism and Theosophy. As she herself notes regarding her early interactions with religion,

Between the age of 23 and 35 I reread the Bible many times, yet my reading was mediated by oriental religious texts, which were opposed to it by a mystical spirit that forsakes the terrestrial. I devoured Buddhism wholeheartedly; I breathed it in with the same eagerness with which I breathed in the Andean mountain wind. Buddhism was that for me: a cold wind that excited me all the while it chilled my inner life; nonetheless, when after weeks of Buddhist diet I returned to my old, worn-out Bible, I had to acknowledge that only therein I could find the firm ground for my feet. (“Mi experiencia” 44)⁸⁸

Needless to say, Mistral assumed an ambivalent position toward institutionalized religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular. Mistral, for

⁸⁸ Mistral would be receptive to Buddhist thought throughout her life, to the point where, according to Vargas Saavedra, she would feel a certain exclusion from her contemporaries as a result of this “esoteric” interest. Mistral explains this lack of receptivity as a symptom of modern Latin American societies’ “youth” and “immaturity”: “In our new nations . . . a practitioner of Buddhism will not find a welcoming group of people that may nurture his/her vocation and sustain his/her spirit, and if he/she is neo-Christian he/she will not be able to find any of those warm meetings of Gospel revisionists wherein opinions can be shared” (qtd. in Vargas Saavedra 15). Regarding Theosophy, Martin C. Taylor indicates that “In pursuing [it] she freed herself from the structures of theology and the incantations of the clergy without ever denying the essential aspects of Christianity: the teachings, morality, and sacrifice of Jesus Christ” (55). Taylor also points to the spiritual analogies between Mistral and Nervo, both of whom were drawn toward oriental thought, but none of whom renounced the Christian faith: “Although both had disavowed the Catholic church and its dogmas, Nervo for faith in the power of rationalism (which he eventually spurned), and Mistral for rational inquiry into Theosophy, neither completely gave up belief in Jesus Christ as God. They lived in the shadow of his suffering, accepting pain as a necessary concomitant of life and love” (78).

example, arrived in Mexico in 1922, and a few years later she would witness the effects of various anti-clerical laws set forth by the Mexican post-revolutionary government, which wanted not only a total separation between Church and State, but also to diminish as much as possible the ideological authority and material possessions of the catholic body. The tensions between the government and the Church culminated in the Cristero Rebellion (1926-29).⁸⁹ In an article devoted to the life of Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney (1786-1859), a French priest who early in his life was called to serve in Napoleon's war against Spain but subsequently deserted his duties (his experience thus emblemizing the disruption of a religious vocation on the part of a violent, secular order), Mistral makes an explicit allusion to the military persecution endured by priests and churchmen in Mexico: [Vianney] was forced to live during tumultuous times in which priests were persecuted and killed, which is the fate of today's Mexican children; he had to listen to clandestine masses led by errant priests in fields of hay . . . As it occurs in México" ("Juan María" 163). In "El catolicismo en los Estados Unidos," she similarly expresses her sympathy toward the clergy and her disdain for the radically secular policies pursued by the Mexican government, but suggests that their violent persecution may have the positive effect of reunifying catholic groups into a politically-influential force:

The separation [between Church and State] in Mexico perhaps created the absolute and lamentable divorce which exists today—and which becomes more visible with each day—between conservatives and liberals. The only way this abyss could be lessened—not of course erased—is if a strong social conscience is produced amongst Catholics; likewise, if an organized, strong Church—civically active—is made respectable in the eyes of radical groups. ("El

⁸⁹ Alternately referred to as the Cristero War [*Guerra Cristera*] and "La Cristiada." For more on the history of this rebellion, see Meyer. For a study of its representation in Mexican narrative, see Arias Urrutia.

catolicismo” 67)

While Mistral sides here with the catholic establishment, it wouldn't be correct to say that she was an avid follower or practitioner of catholic ritual, or that, in her capacity as an intellectual, she ever promoted the interests of the clergy.⁹⁰ She remained throughout her life an idiosyncratic Christian. In her own words, “I am a Christian, but I have a very personal understanding of religion. I can't speak about this. All I can tell you is that I am not dogmatic and that I pray to God, that is, I speak with God in a way that is entirely my own” (qtd. in Horan 42). Bearing in mind Mistral's receptivity toward non-Christian ideas, Vargas Saavedra further adds that “Beginning in 1925 and until her death, Gabriela Mistral adopts the position of a social neocatholicism with ‘subtle’ traits of orientalism, rosicrucianism, yoga, and Buddhism” (14). In her own peculiar way, Mistral adhered to the main tenets of

⁹⁰ As Elizabeth Horan points out, Mistral was able to attend school in the first place thanks to the increasing availability of secular education in Chile, which the Church resolutely opposed. The issue of extending or not education to the lower social classes was a “major battlefield” in the later part of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. While liberal politicians (who believed fundamentally in the separation of Church and State) regarded universal education as a means “to consolidate their power,” the Church “perceived secular education, technical education, the teaching of science, the concept of the ‘Estado Docente’ . . . and particularly the education of women as a most alarming aspect of the general threat to its influence” (17). An interesting debate in which Mistral's apprehension toward Church power came to the foreground was on the issue of women's right to vote. On this issue, Mistral would side with Pedro Aguirre Cerda (a politician from the Popular Front who eventually became president in 1938), who pledged to grant women the right to vote but then failed to make good on his promise because “he feared that women would simply vote as the Church or their husbands told them, thus constituting a basis of support for conservative and even reactionary candidates” (Horan 29). Mistral would express a similar concern that women would vote conservatively (which in her mind was synonymous with voting in a “as a man”): “the question is not that of women's right to vote, but of attaining the great achievement that is universal suffrage without duplicating men's illiterate vote”; such an outcome had already occurred, according to Mistral, in Spain, where “For the most part, Spanish women voted against the Republic which gave her the right to vote” (qtd. in Horan 41). Her misgivings replicate those expressed by the Spaniard Concepción Arenal, who advocated for women's rights in the later nineteenth century but was not sure that women would be allowed to cast their vote independently in her own time, for which reason she intermittently refrained from endorsing the suffragists' vindicationss. In her “Discurso en la Unión Panamericana,” Mistral would say, as an aside, and perhaps contradicting her “intense yearning for social justice,” “I have no yearnings for popular recognition, for entering into politics. I am not, by the way, a suffragist. Rather, I have the justice-seeking heart of a teacher who has educated poor children and who has witnessed the misery of workers and peasants in our countries” (54).

Christian ideology; yet she emphasized those aspects that agreed with her more existential and philosophical vision of humanity (pain, desolation, dispossession). Thus, if Mistral promotes Catholicism as a vanguard force in the social sphere, she does so on the condition that it strip itself off of its superficial and material concerns: “Catholicism has to bring about the overcoming of that which, due to indolence or egotism, has alienated us, and this will be possible if we Catholics can show that we are truly capable of renunciation, in other words, that we are truly open to the very essence of our doctrine” (“Cristianismo” 37); “The good that we can do to Catholicism and Christianity in general is to sacrifice our material interests” (38). In this way, only a “desolate” form of Christianity would act, in Mistral’s view, as a unifying force and as a point of reference for the community.

In “Mi experiencia con la Biblia,” Mistral speaks of the Jewish Bible in terms of both space and community; the Jewish Bible, for Mistral, epitomizes the common (an object, possession, or *corpus* that Christians and Jews share in equal measure):

Vosotros hebreos y nosotros cristianos poseemos, queramos o no confesarlo, un lugar de convocación, especie de alta y ancha meseta tibetana, en la cual encontrarnos, vernos al rostro, ensayar siquiera el cerco de la unidad rota; en el cual podemos, sin desatar entero el nudo de nuestro conflicto, ablandar el filo de la tensión y este país o este clima mora es, en la Biblia, vuestro Viejo Testamento que nos es común, común, común.

You Hebrews and us Christians share, whether we admit this or not, a gathering place, a high, wide, Tibetan-like plateau on which we can converge, see each other face to face, rehearse the space of our broken unity; a space on which, without completely erasing our conflicts, we can assuage the tension, and that country, that place is, in the Bible, your Old Testament, which is for us common, common, common. (“Mi experiencia” 46)

Although Mistral focuses here on the Jewish and Christian communities and of what they hold in common (the “Old Testament”), I would argue that her poetry extends the

religious imperative onto the secular world, to the extent that the emblem of Christ (on the cross and undergoing his own radical form of desolation) would ideally function as the image, figure, or icon that gives community its own figuration and “purpose”—a figure and purpose that, not unlike Christ’s perpetual state, would be characterized by fragility and by the inability to completely transcend its own pain.

This call for a turn or re-turn to the Christian figure is the subject of “Al oído de Cristo,” a poem in which the speaker literally turns to Christ’s ear in order to voice her discontent with the secular turn away from a religious sensibility. The speaker criticizes in particular the bourgeoisie’s repulsion against the visible and corporeal signs of Christ’s suffering:

Les parece que hay exageración
y plebeyo gusto; el que Tú lloraras
y tuvieras sed y tribulación,
no cuaja en sus ojos dos lágrimas claras.

They find it exaggerated
and plebeian in taste; the fact that You cried,
felt thirst and pain,
two plain tears is an inexplicable event in their eyes. (*Desolación* 60)

The poem is organized around a series of gestures that suggest either confrontation or avoidance: the speaker’s turn toward Christ and the people’s turn away from his “forma demasiado cruenta” ‘all-too-cruel form’ (59). Additionally, the speaker seeks to turn Christ’s attention toward the people’s religious inattention; she desires to revive the dead spirit of the people through the shocking contemplation of the crucified divinity. The speaker apostrophizes Christ as well as the community, attempting to counter the latter’s apathy (“están muertas / de una laxitud” ‘they are dead / from laxity,’ “Porque como Lázaro ya *hieden*, ya *hieden*” ‘Because like Lazarus

they reek, they reek' [author's emphasis])). The apathetic community toward which the speaker turns her attention is a community that refuses to confront the full force of Christ's agony; that refuses, moreover, to metaphorically uphold the defeat represented in this agony, thus missing the opportunity to configure itself around the concept—indeed incarnation—of fragility. In criticizing the community's aversion of the abject side of the crucifixion, Mistral's poem also assumes a critical stance with respect to *modernista* refinement, which ostensibly idealized and eroticized the (usually feminine) body as cold, sickly, pale, inhuman, but nonetheless beautiful. Perhaps influenced by the *modernista* taste for outward beauty, the social gaze is repulsed by the messy spectacle of Christ's crucified body. The speaker, on the contrary, refuses to sublimate corporeal violence, in fact regarding it as constitutive of a meaningful Christian experience. The last section of the poem is thus permeated by images that convey a distinct desire to re-turn the social gaze toward the specifically abject portion of Christ's passion, thereby granting the community a renewed source of life:

¡Oh Cristo, un dolor les *vuelva* a hacer viva
 l'alma que les diste y que se ha dormido,
 que se la *devuelva* honda y sensitiva,
 casa de amargura, pasión y alarido.

...

¡Llanto, llanto de calientes raudales
renueve los ojos de turbios cristales
 y les *vuelva* el viejo fuego del mirar!

Oh Christ, may a pain return to life
 the soul you gave them and is now asleep,
 may this pain return it deep and sensitive,
 house of bitterness, passion and screams.

...

That a cry, a cry of hot torrents

may renew their blurred crystal-eyes
returning to them the old fire of sight! (60)

Mistral's turn or re-turn to religion (conveyed in these verses through variations or evocations of the verb *volver*) does not necessarily pretend to reinstate God's former presence as guarantor of meaning and redemptive agent of humanity; much less does it seek to reinstate the Church's institutional dominance over all aspects of social relation. Mistral's approach to and recuperation of Christian symbolism is emphatically non-triumphant. For one, the Christian divinity always appears in a "castrated" form. Jaime Giordano candidly describes the divinity's state in saying that, "God, the Lord, has lost his absolute character. God suffers innumerable vicissitudes in Mistral's poetry: silent, sad, apathetic, victim, sufferer, stupefied, somber, forgotten; or otherwise horrible, angry, source of death" (29). Just as the divine makes its presence visible to the world and to humanity in a non-triumphant, even humiliating form, the community envisioned in Mistral's poetry—which finds its source of "authority" and point of convergence in and around the emblem of an agonizing god—forges its own image in a distinctly weak mode. While Mistral's community is religious in the sense that it cannot abandon the name, concept, or idea of God, the manner in which it "holds on" to this concept is itself what grants it its distinction: the community becomes aware of its fragile constitution in the confrontation with the divine's image. In witnessing the god's enduring agony and debasement, the community reflects upon its own agony and potential annihilation. Gained, then, is the realization that what simultaneously sustains and undermines the community is death, more specifically the god's *dying*. It is at this

moment—when the divine other’s death exposes it to its own dying—that the community *trembles*.⁹¹

“Al oído de Cristo” is preceded by a poem titled “La Cruz the Bistolfi,” which again insists on the community’s re-turn to Christ and further explains what kind of a relation would arise between the agonizing Christ and the subject who connects with the divinity:

Cruz que ninguno mira y que todos sentimos,
la invisible y la cierta como una ancha montaña:
Dormimos sobre ti y sobre ti vivimos;
Tus dos brazos nos mecen y tu sombra nos baña.

El amor nos fingió un lecho, pero era
sólo tu garfio vivo y tu leño desnudo.
Creímos que corríamos libres por las praderas
y nunca descendimos de tu apretado nudo.

De toda sangre humana fresco está tu madero,
y sobre ti yo aspiro las llagas de mi padre,
y en el clavo de ensueño que lo llagó, me muero.

¡Mentira que hemos visto las noches y los días!
Estuvimos prendidos, como el hijo a la madre,
A ti, del primer llanto a la última agonía.

⁹¹ Just as the statue in “El pensador de Rodin” (*Desolación* 57), having formerly trembled at its own beauty and at love (“tembló de belleza,” “tembló de amor” ‘he trembled from beauty,’ ‘he trembled from love’), now trembles at the thought of its own mortality. In this poem, however, dying is still presented as the solitary affair of a subject withdrawn into the drama of his own destruction. Though impotent and defeated—or perhaps because of it—his agony may still thus be described as autonomous, romantic, and sublime. Dying in “El pensador” is not yet a *passion*: it is not shared. The last verse of the poem leaves us with the image of “este hombre que medita en la muerte” ‘this man who mediates upon death.’ The Thinker’s inner and outer gazes are turned inward, and he is forever suspended in a self-reflexive pose: “Con el mentón caído sobre la mano ruda” ‘With his chin resting on his rough hand.’ The Thinker’s agony is thus of itself and for itself. A word used by the speaker to describe the Thinker, “crispado” (“tense,” “contorted,” but also “contracted” or “withdrawn,” as well as “scorched”), conveys this sense of subjective withdrawal and enclosure. The Thinker’s self-withdrawn pose, with its implicit rejection of the outside human and social spheres, may also allude to Théophile Gautier’s response to the charges of social irresponsibility hurled at his doctrine of “Art for Art’s Sake,” which Mistral would here be echoing: “Laissez mon pale front s’appuyer sur ma main. / N’ai-je pas de mon flanc, d’où mon âme s’écoule, / Fait jaillir une source où boit le genre humain?” ‘Let my pale brow rest on my hand. / Have I not caused to flow out of my side, from which my soul emerges, a spring from which the human race drinks’ (qtd. in Picard 60).

Cross which no one sees and which everyone senses,
invisible and true like a wide mountain:
We sleep upon you and live upon you;
Your arms cradle us and your shadow bathes us.

Love feigned a bed, but it was only
your living hook and your naked log.
We thought we ran free through the prairies
and we never descended from your tight embrace.

Your timber is fresh with all human blood
and on you I inhale the wounds of my father,
and on the fantasy nail that wounded him, I die.

It is a lie we have seen the nights and the days!
As the son with his mother, we held on
to you, from the first cry to the final agony. (*Desolación* 58)

The poem upholds the figure of the cross as an embodiment of the experience of Christ's pain. I would argue that the poem also outlines the *ideal* manner in which a member of the mistralian community would relate to the divine: the human subject identifies with this figure to such an extent that it becomes incorporated into his/her very being. Importantly, however, this incorporation or conversion does not take place in a revelatory moment; the cross, on the contrary, has always already been incorporated: "As the son with his mother, we held on / to you, from the first cry to the final agony." In this sense, the experience or incorporation of Christ's agony (divine experience) parallels the structure of artistic experience outlined in "El Arte," which was emphatically non-evental, and which instead proposed an enduring yet vivid mode of relating to the divine. In this ideal scenario, Christ, through the cross, is internalized—his proper dwelling or temple having become the human subject's interiority. No sovereign decision on the human part is involved: the cross has been

incorporated before birth, before coming into being. And yet while Christ is incorporated he remains in a certain sense a foreign presence, not entirely assimilated, which is precisely what allows for the human subject to experience pain, Christ's pain. The cross, in other words, is internalized *as* an external object; it is *within* but not entirely *of* the subject. The cross's minimal alterity is precisely what allows the subject to be affected. Christ's pain is felt to the extent that it moves or disturbs the subject's interiority, and that it does so in the manner of an external gesture or force (as a "living hook" or "fantasy nail").

While "La Cruz de Bistolfi" may be said to represent the ideal scenario of relating to the divine (i.e. through its internalization), in most instances Mistral's work will dwell on the relation attained with the divine in an externalized form. In this sense, Mistral's poetry explores the alternative to the transcendental and to the immanent paradigms, which would respectively situate the divine either in a place outside of the world and of human reach or in a place that would be identical with the human subject's inner space. This alternative situates the divine on the landscape, a gesture by which it is also tainted with the signs of exposure and precariousness. Neither transcendent nor immanent, the divine in Mistral's universe dwells on the earth, at times in the recognizable figure of Christ and at other times as a fallen tree or log, to name one important example.⁹²

⁹² As Martin C. Taylor indicates, "By metaphorically developing the symbiosis of Christ with the Cross, the poet depicts wood, or things made of wood, as holy, or as signifying personal suffering, humility, and death. The leaves, branches, trunks, and roots of trees, through anthropomorphism, turn into hair, arms, bodies, and feet" (91). In his very original and unorthodox reading of Gabriela Mistral's poetry, *Sobre árboles y madres*, Patricio Marchant argues that within the stock of images and symbols employed by the poet, a tree will always represent a mother, while, on the other hand, Christ will signify the absolute Mother (the Mother of all mothers); consequently, the figure of the tree will also symbolize Christ. According to Marchant, humans possess an "archaic" longing to "cling to"

In this manner, the divine acquires a “situated” existence, which in turn creates the conditions for witnessing its agony. In preferring to visualize and engage the god in incarnate form—as a phenomenal presence subjected to the contingencies and privations of earthly existence—Mistral’s poetry attempts to answer the question “Who is this God?” rather than the more ontological one “What is God?” The former question allows us to then ask: Where is the god encountered? How is he approached? How does he suffer? To what extent is the god “human”? To what extent, moreover, can one relate to the god as either divine or human and thereby construct and sustain a community? Jean-Luc Nancy points out that “The question ‘*what is God?*’ is an essentially monotheistic one,” inasmuch as it already presupposes “*quod Deus est*,—that God is” (*The Inoperative* 111, 110). In presupposing that God is, this question understands God as equivalent to or synonymous with Being. Like Being, God would thus be one, indivisible, and abstract. The issue of monotheism and polytheism is thus not simply reduced to a question of numbers (God is One or many). Rather, monotheism, for Nancy, signifies the conception of God *as* Being—as a uniform, pre-existent entity rather than as a singular, differential, or situated one. To envision God as Being already provides the answer to the question “What is God?”: in the background to this question “God has perhaps become everything (or nothing)” (114). Faced with the poverty of such answer, Nancy suggests that we turn to a different, more challenging line of thought: “We would need to be capable of asking, by a very different turn of question or inquiry, *if there is a place for god*” (114; author’s emphasis). To explore god’s “topographies,” whether they be terrestrial or

[*agarrarse a*] three primary objects: trees, mothers, Christ(s). Mistral’s poetry is abundant with scenes such clinging.

conceptual, is to explore the issue “of divine places.” Nancy summarizes the task, themes, and topics that would be associated with this kind of inquiry:

Of divine places: of the gods and their places; of the places they have abandoned and of those where they hide; of gods without hearth or home, of nomadic gods; of the *here* where the gods are *also*; of the common places of God; of the gods common to all places, to some places, to no place; of God: in what way he is a *topos*; topics and atotopes of the divine; of gods and places: treatise on divine paronomasia; where is God to be found? in what place? (114; author’s emphasis)

A facet of Mistral’s work explores these very questions, envisioning the god’s placement alongside the human community, coexisting and sharing in his pain and agony. The god, in Mistral, is phenomenally encountered, and, as we have seen, encountered in a peculiarly abject form. Mistral’s poetry envisions the placement of the divine as essentially unsheltered and exposed, and this exposure as in turn endless. Let me turn to a couple of examples that illustrate this scenario.

In a poem from *Tala* (1938) titled “Nocturno del descendimiento,” Mistral describes a scene of intolerable yet imperative witnessing. A pilgrim, having arrived at the “field” where the crucified Christ is found, observes and describes his suffering as well as his descent from the cross—a descent, however, that does not conclude, that does not cease to arrive, such that, while perpetually descending from the cross, Christ is unable—perhaps unwilling—to finalize his task and end the corporeal suffering, abjection, and humiliation that accompany his un-deposed state (Christ, in other words, is unable to move beyond the deposition and onto the glory of the resurrection). If the speaker carried any hopes of receiving a positive answer to her prayers, these are shattered in the contemplation of the god’s own impotence: “vine a rogarte por mi carne enferma; / pero al verte mis ojos van y vienen / de tu cuerpo a mi

cuerpo con vergüenza” ‘I came to pray for my sick flesh; / but in seeing you my eyes come and go / from your body to my body with shame’ (*Tala* 30). The object of this “shame” remains ambiguous, but it may be reasonable to see it as a double shame: the shame experienced by the speaker for finding herself, despite her illnesses, in an better condition than Christ; and the shame attributed to Christ on account of his naked weakness. Here is a god who can provide little to no consolation or salvation, to the point where the human speaker is herself forced to become the divinity’s support, to assume, against her expectations, the supporting role or position: “y el encuentro se vuelve un recogerte / la sangre como lengua que contesta,” “coger tus pies en peces que gotean,” ‘and the encounter becomes [an act of] holding up / your blood like a responsive tongue,’ ‘holding up your feet like two dripping fish’ (30). Just as Christ’s descent is interminable, so is the supportive task assumed by the speaker. There would thus be no end to this witnessing, to the shame emerging thereof, nor, conversely, to the solidarity provoked by this shame. The narration of this scene is populated by images and actions that denote and connote the body’s descent, and that in their repetition, in their insistence, have the effect of perpetuating the deposition and of postponing the body’s arrival to the ground and to its ground—the ground at the foot of the cross and the burial ground (tomb) where the body will rest and out of which it will arise. Thus, the speaker finds herself

con tu bulto vencido en una cesta
que cae y cae y cae sin parar
en un trance que nadie me dijera.
Desde tu vertical cae tu carne
en cáscara de fruta que golpean:
el pecho cae y caen las rodillas
y en cogollo abatido, la cabeza.

with your beaten shape on a slope
that falls and falls and falls without end
in a trance that no one would have told me about.
From your vertical stance falls your flesh
like the peels of a fruit:
the chest falls and the knees fall
and like a crushed tuber, the head. (31)

Faced with this incessant falling—which places a “divine weight” in her arms—the speaker issues an imperative or plea for conclusion (“Acaba de llegar, Cristo, a mis brazos,” ‘Finish arriving, Christ, to my arms’). This poignant demand, however, only underscores the fact that no conclusion will take place; that the speaker is obliged to sustain the physical and symbolic pain of Christ’s fall. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker regards herself as radically isolated, describing her position as, “. . . estoy sola en esta luz sesgada / y lo que veo no hay otro que vea / y lo que pasa tal vez cada noche / no hay nadie que lo atine o que lo sepa,” ‘. . . I am alone in the midst of this oblique light / and that which I see no other sees / and that which occurs each night / perhaps no one may chance upon or comprehend’ (31). As in “Al oído de Cristo,” the speaker falls short of experiencing a true sense of community, and this because the fall is missed by the Other(s); it goes unnoticed by the “sons” (“no la sujetan,” “no [la] reciben,” ‘they do not uphold it,’ ‘they do not receive [it]’). The speaker, on the other hand, upholds the fragile emblem of Christ, thereby enduring the fall to its limit. Despite the fact that the divinity’s suspended image is seemingly missed by the rest of the world, the poem still provides an outline of the mistralian community, albeit in negative form. Put otherwise, by indicating that the divinity’s fall is not witnessed, nor sustained, nor received, the poem argues that this endless fall should be witnessed,

sustained, and received by the “sons,” by the entire community, and not only by the solitary speaker.

In Mistral’s poetry, the passion of Christ—in which the crucifixion constitutes a critical yet suspended moment, the event that in the Christian narration antecedes the glorious body—will be characterized by its perpetuity, by its inability to conclude, by its failure to complete the step beyond and onto the way of the resurrection, onto the body’s vertical and jubilant reintegration with itself and with its purpose:

Está sobre el madero todavía
y sed tremenda el labio le estremece.
¡Odio mi pan, mi estrofa y mi alegría,
porque Jesús padece!

He remains on the wood,
and with terrible thirst his lips tremble.
I loathe my bread, my stanza and my happiness,
for Jesus suffers! (*Desolación* 63)

Cuerpo de mi Cristo,
te miro pendiente,
aún crucificado.
¡Yo cantaré cuando
te hayan desclavado!

Body of my Christ,
I see you suspended,
crucified still.
I will sing when
your nails are pulled out! (*Desolación* 70)

The passion will thus find itself suspended, interrupted in the drama of the crucifixion—a condition described as one of utter abandonment and desolation—both for the impotent god and for the human subjects willing or capable to turn their gazes toward the dying divinity. In his agonizing state, the divine figure is humanized; neither transcendent nor immanent, it dwells and is suspended in a state susceptible to

approach and to witnessing by the human subject. The abject force of its sighting compels the human subject (and, ideally, the entire community) to sustain, uphold, and thereby be touched by the signs of fragility, precariousness, and desolation. In this way, Mistral's poetry provides an alternative (non-triumphant, non-resurrectional) mode of relating to the (human or divine) dying Other.

CHAPTER 3

Cleansing the Nation, Staining the Community: On the Work of Eugenio Dittborn

Following the 1973 coup, the military regime forcefully asserted its normative discourse within the nation's cultural and intellectual spheres, making the case for viewing both urban and natural spaces as inherently void of political meaning and thus as essentially irrelevant—harmless—with respect to social or political discussions. This chapter will explore the processes of political cleansing or voiding as they occurred in relation to the Chilean geography. I will trace a brief—and admittedly partial—history of the political and ideological importance which the Chilean landscape acquired during and after the dictatorship. This history can be summarized as the desire to politically neutralize the landscape, on the one hand, or to inscribe it with political, social, and memorial significance, on the other. For my purposes, I will focus mainly on two visual projects, albeit disproportionately: Eugenio Dittborn's Airmail Paintings (*Pinturas Aeropostales*), to which I devote the bulk of this chapter; and the iceberg that functioned as Chile's official contribution to the 1992 World's Fair held in Seville. In regards to Dittborn's production, my reading will single out three recurring figures or leitmotifs: the house, the face, and oil. These motifs will allow me to explore more general and political-related issues such as community, exclusion and inclusion, contamination and cleansing, guilt, and violence in relation to the dictatorship. The iceberg, on the other hand, will conclude this chapter (and open onto the following and last chapter) by highlighting a certain ideological continuity between dictatorship and democratic transition, which in Chile was politically led by

the Concertación coalition⁹³: if the military regime is concerned with cleansing the social and political field, the democratic regime is concerned with cleansing Chile's internationally-tarnished image, presenting in its place the idea of a transparent (i.e. politically reborn) community.

When speaking of space (particularly landscape) as either politically “neutralized” or “charged,” I will at times refer to this as a “humanizing” or “dehumanizing” process, or in terms that otherwise connote some kind of “humanization.” I understand that this word alludes to José Ortega y Gasset's notion of the “dehumanization of art,” which refers generally to the gradual eradication of “the human” from Western art, and which, according to him, culminates early in the twentieth century with the purportedly “dehumanized” avant-garde work. Picasso, Debussy, and Mallarmé would exemplify this evolution in painting, music, and poetry, respectively. Ortega y Gasset suggests that the avant-garde's program is essentially incompatible with human or natural representation. Characterized by extreme conceptual difficulty, “dehumanized” art distorts reality, reducing nature to geometric forms and ideas, with which it is impossible to “coexist” (27); it is an art for the intellectual minorities, for those who possess a certain intuitive or aesthetic organ, which the masses inevitably lack (14); “dehumanized” art is thus essentially

⁹³ “In the re-democratization period [which began with the 1989 democratic elections], Chilean politics are structured around two main political blocks. The governing Concertación is a centre-left coalition formed by the Christian Democrats (PDC), the Socialists (PS), the Party for Democracy (PPD), the Radical Party, and other small political parties. The opposition block corresponds to the UPC (Unión por Chile), a right-wing coalition formed by National Renovation (RN), Independent Democratic Union (UDI), and other small right-wing parties” (Castiglioni 102). The 1989 presidential elections were won by the Concertación candidate, Patricio Alwyn. Concertación candidates also won majorities in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Since Alwyn, Chile's presidents had all belonged to the Concertación. This changed in 2010, when the presidential elections were won by Sebastián Piñera, the candidate put forth by a coalition of political groups called Coalición por el Cambio.

“unpopular,” even “antipopular” (13). Ortega refers to this “new” art as one created specifically for the community of those who practice it: an “art for artists,” or an “artistic art” (19). In speaking of visual art, Ortega y Gasset refers exclusively to painting, what’s more, to a type of painting that, despite its radical difference with respect to an older tradition, is still bound to the space of the frame and makes no attempt to transcend it. The artistic scene I refer to in this chapter—which shares a link with the tradition referenced by Ortega y Gasset—moves the artwork beyond the borders of the frame⁹⁴ and situates it within the social space; needless to say, it does not oppose the human to the artistic. Chile’s neo avant-gardism, in other words, does not entail a process of “dehumanization.” The art that emerges in 1970s Chile is hermetic, difficult, and formally experimental; yet it is also open to the social gaze and politically-engaged. While it renounces conventional representation, it does not pretend to situate itself at a remove from “the masses.” If anything, it aims for the opposite: to erase “all frontiers of delimitation between the artistic and the non-artistic in order to culminate in the utopian fusion of art/life” (Richard, *Márgenes* 17). Such art (no longer exclusively representational, but performative as well) attempts to expand the space of visibility of the artwork (the institutional space of the museum,

⁹⁴ Derrida complicates the opposition between interiority and exteriority in the artwork through an analysis of the concept of the “parergon” as developed by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (see Derrida, *The Truth* 37-82). As Robin Marriner indicates, “Through addressing the frame of the work, a seemingly incidental feature which usually goes unnoticed, he draws attention to the limits, oppositions, and structures within which any thinking about the object is worked through. By attending to the frame he problematizes the contrasts and oppositions between what is intrinsic and what is extrinsic to the work, which have underpinned the philosophizing of art. He does this not with the aspiration of dispensing with the frame and those terms (necessary for thought), but in order to disclose the mode and conditions of working of what is taken as ‘given,’ i.e. to disclose the ‘logic’ of the relations between ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority’” (351-52). Marriner contrasts Derrida’s arguments with those presented by American sculptor Donald Judd, who (as the New Critics proposed regarding poetry) “writes of the meaning of the art work as immanent, as somehow residing in the work itself” (354).

the studio, and the frame) by incorporating the street, the public square, and the natural landscape as potential surfaces for creative expression.

Dittborn belongs to what Nelly Richard refers to as the “*Escena de avanzada*.”⁹⁵ As mentioned above, these artists renounce the traditional enclosure of the frame, be it in the form of spatial or theoretical containment. The artworks of the *avanzada* refuse to be interpreted through the same critical vocabulary employed vis-à-vis representational art. This rejection possesses a highly political and contestatory note: “the gesture of the ‘*avanzada*’ to disobey the designations of conventional formats fixed by artistic and literary tradition (the frame in relation to painting; the book in relation to poetry or narrative), figuratively denounced the abuses of authority by which the military regime guarded the frontiers of Order” (*Márgenes* 17).

Through this negation, the *avanzada* “metaphorized the desire to abolish the imprisoning rules of [everyday] experience that foreclosed all horizons of existence.” The artwork, as defined by this eclectic group, is no longer a *thing*, but an *act*, or what Richard calls an “art-situation.”

In short, Richard describes the conceptual transit undergone by the Chilean art-scene as a movement “from the format-frame (the pictorial tradition) to the support-landscape (the living materiality of the social body)” (17), in reference to the abrupt renunciation of conventional modes of representation—which utilize the canvas as their principal means of support—and in favor of a tendency to embody artworks as

⁹⁵ “Emerging from the visual arts (Carlos Leppe, Eugenio Dittborn, Catalina Parra, Carlos Altamirano, the CADA group, Lotty Rosenfeld, Juan Castillo, Juan Dávila, Víctor Hugo Codocedo, Elías Adasme, etc.) and establishing an interaction with the poetic and literary textualities of Raúl Zurita and Diamela Eltit, the *escena de ‘avanzada’* formed a constellation of critical voices that included philosophers and writers such as Ronald Kay, Adriana Valdés, Gonzalo Muñoz, Patricio Marchant, Rodrigo Cánovas, and Pablo Oyarzún, among others” (Richard, *Márgenes* 15).

performative acts situated in both urban and geographical spaces. This shift in regards to art's mode of presentation is accompanied by an equally important shift in regards to artistic permanence or monumentality: the artworks of the *avanzada* generally reject material durability in favor of the phantasmatic permanence afforded by technological means of recording (video and photography).

Airmail Paintings: Departure and Grounding

The Tarapacá desert sits on Chile's northern region, above the larger Atacama Desert. In 1981, Dittborn poured a barrel of burnt car-oil on its surface, the quantity of which amounted to roughly 350 liters. Dittborn's first solo show (an exhibition of drawings in Santiago's Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes) took place in 1974, seven years earlier. Three other solo shows were to follow: in 1976, 1977 and 1978. In the roughly three decades since his oil-spill performance, Dittborn has not repeated a similar act. Nonetheless, the figure of the desert has continued to be evoked in his Airmail Paintings.⁹⁶

In 1984, Dittborn began to exhibit his Airmail Paintings, and has reliably done so until as recently as 2005, when a series of them were showcased in the Sala Gasco de Arte Contemporaneo in Santiago. These works

might be said to belong to the sub-genre of Mail Art (which constituted itself since the 1960s): works sent through the posts by artists outside the regular infrastructure of the established art world, for reasons of politics, economics, distance. But these productions have usually been small, personal and

⁹⁶ While Dittborn has not repeated a performance in the real desert, he has nonetheless consistently used burnt oil in his subsequent work. The desert is alluded to by using surfaces of a similar color: dirty, grainy, darkish yellow. Dittborn is fond of both wrapping paper and brown Kraft paper, both of which possess this color. By marking these surfaces with oil, Dittborn intentionally reproduces each time a miniature version of his 1981 intervention.

essentially inter-artist, whereas Dittborn explores the contradiction between the private letter and the public painting. He does not wish his works to be marginal but to enter [to problematize it, I would add] the domain of mainstream art. (Brett 84)

It is mostly on his Airmail Paintings that Dittborn's national and international reputation rest. These works obey more or less the same logic of production, distribution and exposition, and are part of a wider artistic and literary phenomenon dealing with the effects and traumas of dictatorial violence in Chile as well with the social and cultural issues related to globalization. In their composition, the artist employs a variety of mediums, ranging from stitching to charcoal to conventional painting, as well as a variety of surfaces, from wrapping paper, to cotton duck, to brown Kraft paper. As I mentioned above, three recurring motifs may be highlighted: in addition to oil stains and houses that are drawn with simple lines, and which highlight only their basic structure, Dittborn includes identification-type photographs of marginalized subjects, which are often put alongside child-drawn faces. As Nelly Richard reminds, these photographs

bring together faces of Chilean Indians taken from anthropological archives and those of criminals taken from police files: in both cases, the photographic portrait identifies its subjects as objects of an identificatory classification. They are identity papers mass-produced by the order in which science (anthropology) and the State (the police) have catalogued their subjects as examples of non-integration into the civilizing or socializing norm; foreign bodies which pass through marginal areas either of pre-sociality (the indigenous) or anti-sociality (criminals). They show the eruptions of otherness that the hegemonic cultural norm seeks to recodify by means of the grammar of the portrait. ("Nosotros" 52).

Once completed, the paintings are folded up, packed into large envelopes, and sent over airmail to an artistic venue oftentimes located in a different country or, just as often, in a different continent (i.e. Europe). There, they are unfolded and exhibited,

making visible the signs of their transit and handling, their subjection to temporality and decay. Just as importantly, the Airmail Paintings, in their modality as both transitory and exhibited “letters” or “postcards,” blur the distinction between the utilitarian and the aesthetic, participating fully, as it were, in both orders: as mere letters with respect to the postal system, and as consecrated art objects with respect to the museum/gallery.⁹⁷

The mobility and reproducibility of the Airmail Paintings can be contrasted with the singularity and spatial locatedness of the 1981 oil-spill. An initial approach to the Airmail Paintings would emphasize their infinite repetition and inexhaustibility, their fast and efficient distribution, which replicates the incessant shipment of market goods through modern methods of transportation. They reveal a keen disregard for national frontiers; they are deterritorialized and nomadic, the embodiment of an art eager to be displayed and observed, and which has no qualms about embracing the institutional space of the museum as the privileged site of its exhibition. The Airmail Paintings travel all over the world; they are thus international, global, postmodern. Their preferred elemental substance is air rather than earth, with all the conventional associations that such a substance provides: freedom, movement, openness, transcendence.

⁹⁷ In an interview, Eugenio Dittborn describes the Airmail Painting’s journey through a theoretically-precise vocabulary. The Airmail Paintings obey two movements, “The first occurs while they are being moved from one place to another through the international airmail network, folded and in envelopes: in other words, their epistolary and volumetric form. The second occurs once they arrive at their destination, when they are unfolded, hug up and exhibited next to the empty envelopes, in other words their pictorial and planimetric form.” He goes on to say that “The Airmail Paintings generate a problem in the exhibition space since every exhibition takes place in a fixed spot. In this regard they are different from the tradition of artwork produced for a specific site. Airmail Paintings were conceived for at least two specific site: that of the sender and that of the receiver, as well as for overcoming/producing the distance between the two (“An Airmail” 25).

Such ostensibly positive traits, however, become challenged in the process of their exhibition: once hung, the paintings show minute yet irreversible signs of decay, the wear and tear brought about by the standard accidents of air travel; their surfaces no longer smooth or uniform, they show the traces of their folding.⁹⁸ In the end, they cannot help but highlight their materiality, the stigmas of their journey, their ultimate rootedness in physicality; thus, the impossibility of inhabiting the sky perpetually, of remaining in constant flight, of transcending or renouncing the material and historical spheres from which they depart. The exhibition of their material decay, which betrays the impossibility of halting physical deterioration, establishes a link between the Airmail Paintings and the anti-monumental or ephemeral aesthetics exhibited by the artworks of the *avanzada*, which, as stated above, prefer to survive not in their initial condition as *things* but in their supplementary condition as *recorded events*.

The Airmail Paintings participate in two modes of existence: one of transit and one of stasis. To each is associated a particular space: the natural space of the sky (in relation to transit) and the cultural space of the museum or gallery (in relation to stasis). Moreover, the transitory-aerial mode of existence is primarily invisible (it goes unobserved, possesses no witness), while the stationary mode is fundamentally exposed to the gaze. My reading of the Airmail Paintings will inevitably privilege and depart from their stationary position, regarding them as more or less fixed, and self-present objects. The harder—perhaps unfeasible—task is to approximate these works in their more elusive condition: that of flight. This difficulty stems from the fact that to approach them in a pure, ungrounded state of passage is simply impossible: the

⁹⁸ Dittborn has said that “the political aspect of my work [is] to be found in the folds of the Airmail Paintings (like a poisonous powder hidden there)” (“An Airmail” 20).

Airmail Paintings, in other words, can only be read, it would seem, in relation to a historical, social, or political “ground.” One can proceed to read the Airmail Paintings as transitory, aerial, or detached only in relation to a ground from which they have departed and to which they have returned. The ground becomes the point of departure, the surface in relation to which the fantasy of a free and radically detached flight may take place. The sky—which may symbolize absolute separation, Nature as pure, apolitical space—can in fact only be read from the ground, in relation to an earth wherein politics are disputed; in this sense, it never ceases to be political, nor has it ever been apolitical. Justo Pastor Mellado underscores this impossibility on the part of Nature to remain pure when he says that, “The state of the sky is the stage of painting in its materiality. Its essential characteristics are played out and judged therein. Because what Eugenio Dittborn states is the reminder that *the sky has always already been written upon*” (*El fantasma*; emphasis added).

To repeat: the Airmail Paintings must inevitably return to earth (on a political level, of course, they never departed in the first place). Once they do, and once they are displayed for everyone to see, the condition under which they show themselves is that of the *survivor*. For not only are they the survivors of a long spatial journey, but the survivors, through an accident of the postal system, of the possibility of their lasting disappearance.⁹⁹ The Airmail Paintings live under the threat of their loss. I

⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida has famously written about the postal principle as a metaphor through which to envision the function of language and communication. In the postal system, letters are constantly sent and received. Yet no matter how many precautions one takes (insuring the package, tracking it, choosing a faster delivery method, etc.), nothing and no one guarantees the safe arrival of the letter. A letter can always get lost in its transit. This threat defines the letter’s mode of being. The linguistic sign functions in much the same way as the postal network: nothing guarantees its arrival either. This means, quite simply, that words are always liable to misinterpretation, that sentences and utterances, in their transit from point A to point B, can always get “lost” on a reader or listener (their meaning

could have disappeared: I did not disappear; or, I disappeared but came back, went away but returned, here and now, having traversed the journey, having survived the journey.¹⁰⁰ And while it is true that in their disregard for and traversal of national borders these works reject a certain groundedness in a local or national context, they nonetheless often depict extremely local histories and events (as is again the case with the representation of the “disappeared”). In the cases when they travel to European or North American cultural venues, what the Airmail Paintings do is bring those particular histories of violence and oppression into a different socio-cultural context; the local is displaced onto the international; the political mark of the “Third World” is brought into and invades the cultural spaces of the “First World.” The permeation of the local with the international is read by Nelly Richard as a problematization of the notions of center and periphery. In its constant travel and deferral of a true arrival, an Airmail Painting questions the hegemony of the Center as a site of origin or ultimate destination. Instead, “The work establishes the Centre as simply another stage, one among many, of the inter-communicative chain set up by the gesture of opening and closing the envelope: a bodily awareness of the transitory-provisional nature of every reading, including that done by the Centre, in an endless process of multiple

misapprehended or distorted). Just as the postal system lacks an all-powerful Mailman who would prevent letters from vanishing, language lacks an ultimate Word that would insure the specificity (and arrival) of a word’s proper meaning, a Word that could be appealed to when confusion arises. To envision a transparent language is to envision the abolishment of the postal system, the fantasy of addressing oneself or another person “directly, without *courrier*” (23).

¹⁰⁰ For a reading of the Airmail Paintings as reproducing the libidinal logic of the *fort-da* child’s game as presented by Freud, where the object of desire obeys a cyclical motion of being tossed away and recuperated, lost and recovered, see Adriana Valdés, “Geste”. Valdés describes the Airmail Paintings as “objects of desire that are sent far away, exposed to disaster” (26), and that come back only to be sent away again.

successive replacements” (“Nosotros” 61).¹⁰¹

I want to emphasize that what returns, what invades the museum or gallery room, whether located in Chile or in Europe, is neither a body nor a face as such, but its simulacrum, its residual memory preserved in the photographic instance, which is in turn preserved on the work’s surface. What survives the journey is not the body itself, but its representation, its trace; more specifically, a body *does* survive, one that in fact exhibits its wounds, its stigmata. This body, however, is not the human body, but the surface-support itself, the body of representation rather than that of the represented. If the human figure returns, it does so as an impoverished thing, abject and inglorious. In most cases, what we receive and perceive is a black-and-white photograph, or what in certain instances seems more like the photocopy of a photograph. In the words of Valeria de los Ríos, “one has to admit that the photography employed is not really photography, but rather a *reproduction* of a photograph already mediated by its publication in a newspaper or a magazine, cut out from its original context, and enlarged (“Marks”; author’s emphasis). The realism of the photographic medium (the fidelity or adequacy to its object, its ability to “give life” to what it captures) proves utterly disappointing.

In an interview, Dittborn suggests that his paintings “go into envelopes, just as

¹⁰¹ Dittborn also questions the reverse narrative by which America, not Europe, is perceived as a sign of origin. Thus, when asked in an interview with Adriana Valdés how he understands the word “metaphysics,” Dittborn replies: “Metaphysics means the mirage of origin. The search for a distant point of balance, unchanging and hidden, lost and idealized. The Europeans—from the days of the conquistadores and colonizers down to the present day tourists—have always endowed the American continent with this gift of being the origin, which amounts to having been (and still being) seen as premodern. To conform to this idealized premodernism we have been distilled and reduced until we coincide with some vague idea of handicrafts or folklore. Then, whatever we do that does not conform to these stereotypes (constructed by the international tourist industry) has no credibility. If we are not caricatures of ‘the other,’ we are invisible” (“A Whiter Shade” 39).

treasure goes into chests, children into sleeping bags and ashes into urns” (*Remota* 43). In a similar way, Adriana Valdés suggests that these surfaces, in their being unfolded by the human hand, mimic or at least evoke a scene of exhumation: “There is in the unfolding and displaying of the Airmail Paintings a funeral dimension, as in the exhumation of a cadaver. The painter has distanced himself, letting [the painting] cool down and dry . . . and now we open it to encounter the ghosts which inhabited it at that moment” (169).

Adding to Valdés’ observations, Justo Pastor Mellado suggests that the scene of exhumation mobilized in each instance of unfolding—where the unfolded surface acts as a kind of cloth in which the body is wrapped—evokes the figure of the Christian Holy Shroud, perhaps even, I might add, the entire tradition of iconic images of Christ, the entire history, that is, of *acheiropoieta* (icons that come into being without human interference) (*El fantasma*).¹⁰² For those who venerate it, the Holy Shroud provides the visual testimony of Christ’s body, and thus the proof of his historical existence; more importantly, the imprint signals the body’s glorious transformation, that is, its resurrection. A double confirmation: the Shroud grants proof of Christ’s physical existence while simultaneously giving testimony to the act by which materiality and corporeality is transcended through the overcoming that is the resurrection. If resurrection is understood in a more secular or political sense, as an “overcoming” of authoritarian apprehension, then here, in the Airmail Paintings, no resurrection is signaled. Captured by the panoptic apparatus of the State or by the

¹⁰² For an account of the controversy revolving around the Holy Shroud, as well as an analysis of the curious and unlikely association between photography and religion in the Shroud of Turin, see Mondzain 192-208.

epistemic gaze of scientific knowledge, frozen in either their criminality or in their anthropological curiosity, the subjects in these photographs are metaphorically confined to their “tombs.” The freedom purportedly evinced in their aerial transit is thus ultimately undermined by the veiled yet powerfully-grounding force of official (political or scientific) discourse.

Home, Economy, Administration

The faces in the Airmail Paintings embody the condition of perpetual *transit*. While they are encountered in the immobility afforded by their exhibitional arrest, these faces are nonetheless itinerant; more specifically, what these faces highlight is the political condition of exile (either internal or external). While they may be said to “return home” after their sojourn to the cultural Center, this return is nonetheless imperfect or inadequate. The act of returning home underscores the fact that there is no (nor ever has been) proper home for these marginal subjects; that home, in fact, here designates a space of exclusion and imminent threat. The Airmail Paintings (specifically those which include photographs of faces alongside diagrams or drawings of houses) foreground one of the effects of dictatorial rule, which is rendering the “homeland” into a space of estrangement rather than one of comfort or security. By the same logic that Freud famously uncovered with respect to psychological phenomena, the home here (*heimlich*) coincides with its very opposite: the unhomely (*unheimlich*).¹⁰³ While the subjects on the Airmail Paintings are primarily Chilean, and in fact may be said to represent at times (in those instances when a Mapuche

¹⁰³ See Freud, “The Uncanny.”

Indian is depicted, for example) the ethnic origins of the Chilean community, their political exclusion, their stigmatization by the photographic lens, simultaneously marks these subjects as foreign, as the part excluded from within the political community. This is what Valdés means when she says that “[Dittborn] did not work with his eye set on the Chilean milieu, [he placed] these images and these faces in a space that is neither from here nor from there, a space of pure transit. The continual displacements diminish the force of the dilemma between being situated or not in a determined space. The condition of exile within one’s own homeland, the unreality of the painter’s and his works’ presence, is something that can be seen in this show” (Valdés 168). One may be tempted to celebrate the Airmail Paintings’ ostensive nomadism, their blissful traversal of national frontiers—acts that would emblemize the contemporary world’s freedom with respect to personal mobility and travel. While this may be true for certain parts of the world, we should remember that mobility is in many other places strictly regulated. This was precisely the case for Chileans living under dictatorial vigilance, in which case the Airmail Paintings may be seen as underlining, through their constant mobility, and in a rather ironic way, the concrete immobility to which many Chileans became subjected—an immobility which took on a variety of forms, some more expressively violent than others: imprisonment in jail or unconventional locations, house arrest, and general restrictions on foreign travel.

What is given to the viewer’s gaze is often the figure of a face and a house, or a series of faces and of houses, each encased in one of the squares created by the folds on the surface of the work. Valdés rightly points to the importance of “Historia del

rostro” (“History of the Face”), the title of a particular series of Airmail Paintings, which may in fact function as the *arche*-title of Dittborn’s entire work. Most faces emblemize a condition of marginality. “There are faces of aboriginals from Tierra del Fuego . . . There are delinquent faces from police records . . . There is also a police-artist’s sketch, of the official kind. And there are faces made by an

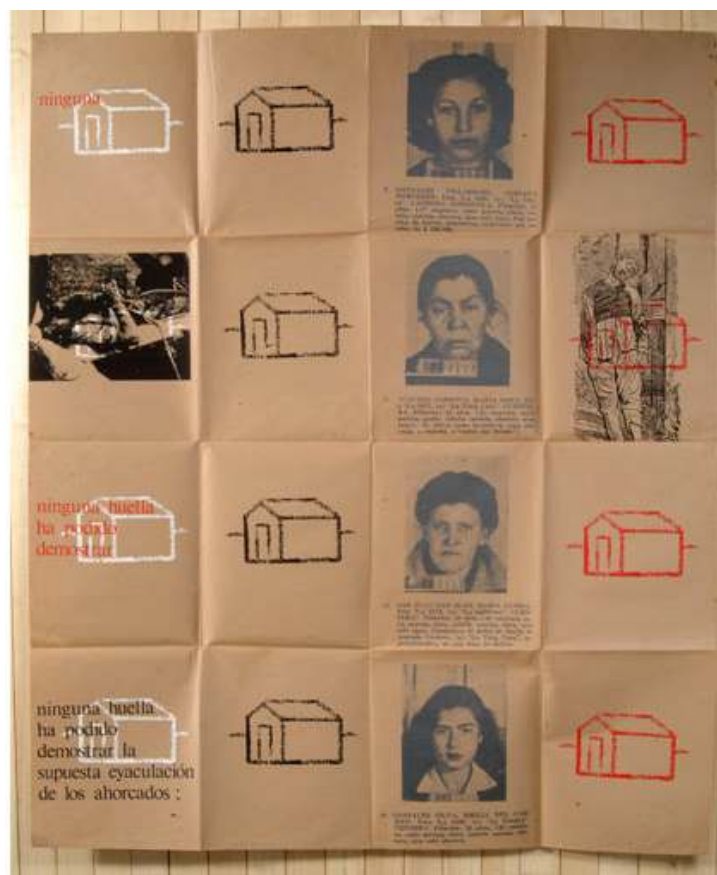


Figure 1. *Pintura Aeropostal num. 13, Sin rastro*, The Blanton Museum of Art, Austin

inexperienced hand, and others by an infant’s hand” (Valdés 174). Thus, these portraits trace a “history of the face” as appropriated and articulated by systems and ideologies of repression. What the viewer witnesses is the face as portrayed “by chance, by colonialism, by the law, by the guidelines and templates of drawing manuals, or by the hand of insanity.” In other words, what the Airmail Paintings show

is the logic of administration and division, inclusion and exclusion, which regimes of authority put in place.

In doing so, the Airmail Paintings provide a political reading of the notion of “economy” (*oikonomia*), a concept that harks back to debates on visual representations of religious and divine subjects. This concept may be analyzed by starting out with a reference on how one of Dittborn’s Airmail Paintings (*Pintura Aeropostal num. 105, La casa de Erasmo de Rotterdam*) came about. In 1993, as part of an exhibition hosted by the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam (Netherlands), Dittborn asked a number of drug addicts from a local shelter to “draw their dream house and to describe the house in which they lived when they were ten years old” (“Eugenio Dittborn”). Dittborn then incorporated some of their drawings and descriptions into his 105th instantiation of an Airmail Painting. Here, as in Dittborn’s other Airmail Paintings, the evocation of the house functions on two registers: on a subjective or affective register, it stands as an image through which the memory of childhood returns as perhaps a site of comfort, of warmth, of security, and of overall happiness; on a more social register, the house stands as an object of desire forever barred, an object which, most likely, none of those who drew their dream house would ever have access to, due to their obvious economic and social precariousness. The house, as both the symbol for a vanished childhood and as evidence for the attainment of a certain (successful) socio-economic status, remains, for these as for other similarly-disenfranchised groups, always out of reach. If the house, as the forever-inaccessible object of desire, represents a sort of personal utopia that fails to materialize, to present itself in the “real world” as an actual possession and habitable

place, it is also, in a certain sense, the place which these subjects already inhabit, inasmuch as the condition they find themselves in is precisely the no-place: the no-place, that is, of political and social non-representation. Those who were asked by Dittborn to conjure up a house very possibly had no real house of their own; they had no place and thus lived in a certain kind of non-place. They were, paradoxically, *in utopia*, in the without-place that was precisely their social non-representation or placelessness. Like the ID photograph, the motif of the house in Dittborn's work symbolizes the political exclusion that befalls on subjects in both the "developed" and "underdeveloped" worlds.

In the Airmail Paintings, the house usually appears in the form a diagram—drawn, that is, in simple, straight lines of a single color that evoke the house as an idea rather than as a real, habitable space. Through their cold, linear austerity, these diagrams underline the house as a distant, unattainable asset; yet they also foreground the violence implicit in the very notion and metaphoric deployment of the house, inasmuch as the house, while functioning as a place of comfort and refuge for those who possess and inhabit it, is also a place of division and hostility—a division and hostility that take place both within the confines of the house (through its spatial organization and through the distribution of the tasks of the household on the part of a figure of authority); and a division that takes place outside of the proper domains of the house, inasmuch as the house does not offer up its space to just about anyone, but necessarily excludes those who find themselves outside of its domain, at its doorstep, in the non-place of social exclusion. The house, then, may be a site of comfort, protection, and shelter; but it may just as often be a site that puts in motion an entire

system or economy of terror, violence, and exclusion. The house as a motif in Dittborn's work wavers and is traversed by both of these senses. As a spectator, I find these houses both tender and frightening, the product of a child's innocent imagination or, just as plausibly, the architectural blueprints of a panoptic State apparatus. As an image that also alludes to the process of division and distribution proper to the management of the household, the house, in Dittborn, allegorizes the division, partition, and administration of the national territory which the dictatorship undertook as one of its principal tasks. Through reference to Giorgio Agamben's and Marie-José Mondzain's thoughtful meditations on the concept of *oikonomia*—as it travels from religious to political discourse—the figure of the house in Dittborn's work may be read as a critical representation of the political and social management of the national household, of the dictatorship's self-imposed task to oversee and execute the general economy of the Chilean nation.

Prior to assuming a distributional or managerial role, the military Junta, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, assumed the role of demolisher of the national household. The Allende regime's populist ideology, in other words, had corrupted the very foundations of the national edifice, a reason for which it was necessary to have recourse to a violent and iconic act of destruction, which would give way to a no-less-violent but perhaps more veiled process of reconstruction and reorganization of the nation's social and economic structures. With the bombing of La Moneda, the Junta created a sort of clean-slate upon which to sketch a new socio-political blueprint; the years of military rule that ensued may thus be read as a process of household management, which was overseen by a paternal authority in the figure of

Augusto Pinochet.¹⁰⁴

Marie-José Mondzain and Giorgio Agamben trace the development of *oikonomia* as a theological concept that, over time, evolves into a political concept. Before its employment on the part of Christian theologians (the first of whom was Paul, who used it “in order to talk about the plan of the incarnation” [Mondzain 13]), *oikonomia* appears in Greek philosophical thought as a concept that references the administration of the household and of the public domain (Mondzain 18). Comprised of the Greek *oikos* (“house”) and *nomos* (“law”), *oikonomia* may be translated as “the law or administration of the house.” For Aristotle, economy—as an original partition of the natural order—is in fact the very condition of possibility for the emergence of sociality and politics:

Aristotle attributes to economics the acquiring of a domestic life and its good functioning, without which, he says, there cannot be any social cohesion. Without this prior cohesion, there is no place for politics, and economics therefore comes before politics. In the second place, economics must conform to nature not only in that it is based first on agriculture, but also inasmuch as nature has already distributed roles and duties within the species themselves. Implicit within the economy is the notion of an organic objective and functional harmony. There is therefore a providential and natural order to be respected while acting in the service of the greatest cohesion of utility and well-being. (Mondzain 19)

The notion that nature—in its distribution of roles to the different species—executes a plan that makes the world function in a harmonious way evolves within Christian thought into the idea that God executes his own plan towards the redemptive

¹⁰⁴ In his reading of the concept of sovereignty in Descartes, Willy Thayer points to the use of a similar constellation of architectural metaphors to convey the notion of foundation. Descartes “Has scattered throughout his text metaphors of destruction: ‘demolition of the edifice of common knowledge by means of the destruction of its foundations’; ‘catastrophe of the home which one inhabits’; ‘devastation of the structures that have been gradually erected from salvage to civilized times, by means of crime and fighting’ . . . ‘If, on the other hand, we completely topple this edifice, we can lay down the foundations for our project,’” etc. (“De regreso” 230-32).

movement of the human species. “From Paul onward,” Mondzain writes, “the economy designated not only the Second Person of the Trinity, but the whole of the redemptive plan, from the conception of the Virgin to the resurrection, including Christ’s evangelical life and the passion. The notion of a divine plan with the aim of administering and managing fallen creation, and thus of saving it, makes the economy interdependent with the whole of creation from the beginning of time” (21). The divine economy, however, does not operate on a purely biblical, utopian, or otherworldly level, but seeks to interfere within the real historical conditions and governing of societies. In other words, “[b]ecause it encompasses the strategy and tactics necessary for the management of a real, historic situation in their totality, the economy always returns to its classic vocation: to be the concept of the management and administration of temporal realities, whether they be spiritual, intellectual, or material” (22). God, then, requires the help of human action and intervention in order to carry out the divine economy, and this is precisely the role which the institution of the Church accords to itself within the design of human redemption.

Through the concept of economy (which bridged the gap between heaven and earth, spiritual salvation and political administration), the Church found a way to enact and justify its interference within social and political concerns. In *What is an Apparatus?*, described as part of a larger investigation into “a theological genealogy of economy” (8), Agamben points to a further evolution and secularization of the concept. Glossing over the term *dispositio* as employed by the Church Fathers, and “positivity” as it appears in Hegel’s work, Agamben concludes that “[w]hat is common to all these terms is that they send us back to this *oikonomia*, that is, to a set

of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient in a way that purports to be useful for the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings” (12). Agamben then arrives, via Foucault, at the more contemporary notion of “apparatus,” a term that signifies “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (14).¹⁰⁵

Religious economy thus evolves into political apparatus. The former term, *economy*, may be more pertinent for a discussion of the Airmail Paintings, and this because of its visual etymology, its origins within an iconographic tradition that, in addition to arguing the administrative and political connotations of the concept, also produced lengthy debates regarding the economy of god’s visual representation within art. As a term that also designates the necessary and self-ordained execution of God’s plan on the part of the religious institution, economy resonates, in the Chilean scenario, with the dictatorship’s own authorization to carry out a plan that would politically, socially, and economically “redeem” or “save” the “fallen” nation. This salvation would come about, socially, through the forceful vigilance of the public

¹⁰⁵ Agamben references an interview given by Foucault, wherein he explains the evolution of his thought from the concept of “episteme,” to those of “apparatus” and “discipline.” “What I’m trying to pick out with this term [*apparatus*],” Foucault says “is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative, measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid . . . The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (194). With respect to the difference between episteme and apparatus, Foucault says: “If you like, I would define the episteme retrospectively as the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won’t say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. The episteme is the ‘apparatus’ which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterized as scientific” (*What is an Apparatus?* 197).

space and through the purging of the cancerous remnants of Marxist ideology; economically, it would come about through the acceleration of neoliberal policies benefiting privatization and consumption. The ways in which the dictatorship administered the roles and limits within the national household have been summarized, among others, by José Joaquín Brunner, who writes,

What is desired in the end is to reorganize everyday life by reintroducing hierarchies and limits, re-erecting social barriers amongst different classes and groups, reducing public expression to official discourse, and redrawing each social subject's essential role: woman at home, young people in school, the worker at his job, the poor at his/her mercy, the Church in its spiritual kingdom. Whatever does not fit within this new social order must be either suppressed or excluded: political parties, parliament, the critical press, the dissident intellectual, the priest concerned with issues of human rights, university autonomy, socially-engaged art. (Brunner, *Un espejo* 52-53)

In its theological inflection, economy sustains another parallel with the Chilean scenario, specifically with the justification of the use of violence as a means to prevent the complete dissolution of the social space and to “correct” the path on which the nation was headed. Just as the military had no other choice but to carry out a coup against the Allende regime, Christian theology argues that the divine economy permits the presence and function of evil, so long as it serves to fulfill the general redemption of humanity. Utopian ends justify material means that create suffering: “If God reveals his salvational plan and intends it to be effective, its economy will make use of all the means familiar to a father in order to bring his wayward son back to him . . . Speech, remedy, guile, condescension, punishment, or lie . . . all the means of the economy are good when one uses them with economy, that is to say, while remaining loyal to the spirit of the divine, providential economy” (Mondzain 21). Similarly, John Chrysostom, an Early Church Father, talked about the “silence required from us”

(Mondzain 37) on the part of the providential economy, as well as of the necessary place of evil within the logical development of salvation. In this regard, Mondzain writes that “The experience of evil and of suffering must encounter its economic solution in the free intelligence of whatever is most profitable for the salvation of Christians, and consequently, the greatness of the church” (38). Likewise, but on a more secular register, Susan Buck-Morss writes that “[*o*]*ikonomia* accepts private property *and* human inequality, both of which precede the *polis*, and determine its form” (176).

By juxtaposing images of houses with photographs of criminalized, marginalized subjects (native Chileans, petty criminals, patients from psychiatric hospitals, etc.), Dittborn’s Airmail Paintings foreground the suffering and inequality inherent to the economy of the dictatorship, an economy which functions in a way analogous to the theological articulation of the concept of *oikonomia* and thus may be said to belong to what Agamben calls the “theological genealogy of economy.” The administration of the household demands a rigorous apportionment of space and of tasks. So long as their voice does not challenge the paternal signifier, those granted the privilege to enter within the confines of the household will live their lives with a relatively firm sense of security and economic comfort. Yet as Dittborn’s work makes poignantly visible, the inclusion within the household entails the opposite yet complimentary act by which a certain, “foreign” Other is excluded. The subjects of the Airmail Paintings look on, straight into the gaze of the viewer, separated from a home with which they share the same surface, next to which in fact they are situated, but which is nonetheless forever distant. Their gaze is the testimony to their without-

place.

A contemporary of Dittborn's, Raúl Zurita has stated that one of the driving forces of his poetry, one of its utopian motivations (perhaps the very motivation that allows it to sustain itself in its proper trembling), is the vision of a skyline populated with human faces: "I have described that image before: the faces of all the people you have loved becoming traced on the sky. Not on the vaults of our huge modern cathedrals, banks or metro stations, but on the sky. Immense portraits drawn by airplanes in strokes of white smoke, cutting against the blue of the horizon, only to be dissolved" (*Los poemas* 7). His poetry may be described as moving from a purported narcissism to a concern for articulating the Other's pain and joy. Thus, at some point in his career Zurita disavowed the self-inflicted wound that accompanied the writing of *Purgatorio*, seeing it, retrospectively, as an act that merely perpetuated the regime of an isolated, non-communal "I." "I understood," he explains, "that I no longer needed to mark my own face, but rather to mark the sky and the desert with a vision that would signify, at least, a glimpse of happiness" ("He sido"). From marking his face, Zurita will move on to marking the sky with human faces. This decision explains not only the sky-poem, but also the sketches dispersed throughout his book *La vida nueva*, where clouds trace the outlines of human figures.

In a way, the Airmail Paintings may be seen as the modest, non-triumphant accomplishment of Zurita's desire.¹⁰⁶ Yet if they bring the human face to the sky, they

¹⁰⁶ There is no doubt that the relation between Dittborn and Zurita is one of mutual admiration, perhaps even of mutual influence. In his *Estrategia y proyecciones de la plástica nacional sobre la década de los 80*, a text that mixes literary criticism, poetry and visual production, and which circulated originally in the 80s in a limited, photocopied edition, Dittborn includes an "interpretation" of one of Zurita's *Purgatorio* poems. Dittborn's "interpretation," titled "paradigma análisis de Desierto de Atacama VI,

do so in a veiled, concealed manner. The immensity of the sky or the cathedral is replaced here by the modesty of the envelope, the “shroud” that both protects and conceals a face or community of faces. While our encounter with these faces takes place post-landing, in the stationary and grounding space afforded by their display, this does not prevent us from imagining their flight. Zurita’s vision of a sky populated with human faces is given to us in an inadequate manner: not as a real, triumphant event, but as one taking place in anonymity and without witness; as an event, moreover, taking place within the social, political, and administrative restraints represented by the postal system.

There is in the Airmail Paintings a constant tension between fixity and fluidity, immobility and flight, management and disruption of space, perhaps even a tension between political death and resurrection. These tensions are most easily perceptible in the Airmail Paintings’ material constitution. Focusing on the frequent motif of the oil-stain, Valdés comments that these marks embody residual excesses that in some way resist total confinement, or that at least are in constant friction with the administration of space imposed by the folds on the canvas. For Valdés, these works ultimately possess a liquid modality: “Painting becomes more present, but in a peculiar way: as the stain, as the oozing motion [*chorreo*] slowly permeating the rigid structures of the works” (173). Rigid sense becomes spilled sense, which to a certain extent resists conceptual and theoretical framing. This leads me to a more extensive exploration of

un poema de Raúl Zurita,” is actually a poem, of which I quote only the first stanza: “autoagresión, autoerotismo / autoatacarse, automatare / atacar, amar / atacamar / atacama / atacama del desierto” autoaggression, autoeroticism / autoattacking oneself, autokilling oneself / to attack, to love / attackamalove / atacama / atacama of the desert.’ Once again, and for reasons of space, I am unable to hazard a closer reading.

the function of oil in Dittborn's work.

The Politics of Hygiene: Marking the Desert with Oil

The description just given to the Airmail Paintings (incarnations of “spilled sense”) may perhaps more appropriately describe Dittborn's 1981 intervention on the Tarapacá desert,¹⁰⁷ if anything because this intervention involves a literal spillage.

Like the Airmail Paintings, one of the effects of this work is to sully, make dirty, stain what is seemingly homogeneous, untainted, and separated from historical contingency: in this case, the desert (rather than, for example, the museum or the sky).¹⁰⁸ The oil-spill contradicts many of the “positive” characteristics typically

¹⁰⁷ I should clarify that the oil-spill, though singled-out in my reading, is part of a larger work titled “Historia de la Física” (“History of Physics,” 1982). “Historia de la Física” is an 18 minute video that links eclectic footage into a sort of visual totality. The sequence is as follows: people sunbathing on a beach, a live performance by Frankie Laine, the oil-spill, a boxing match, a man playing bongo drums, a woman swimming on a pool, a human birth, a woman (the same as before) exiting a pool. I single out the oil-spill for the obvious and convenient reason that it pertains to the present discussion; like many other works by Dittborn, “Historia de la Física” merits its own reading, one that would take into account the various distinct parts which comprise the video. Pastor Mellado provides some helpful facts relating to the intervention on the desert: the oil-spill took place on 4 February 1981, “50 kilometers from Iquique, in a place near the Oficina Salitrera Humberstone, which was abandoned during the 1920s crisis.”

¹⁰⁸ In regards to the *avanzada*'s resistance to being appropriated by the museum, Richard says the following: “The work of the ‘*avanzada*’ also speaks against the ideological restriction of artistic value by which the museum deprives works of their taking place [*acontecer*], making them ahistorical through the erasure of any temporal trace that would signal a potential belonging to a web of concrete historical productivity. ‘Art-actions’ affirm the concreteness of the here and now of its subject’s quotidian participation in the unfolding of the work, refusing to perish as past in the extemporaneousness of the gaze of the exposition’s visitor” (*Márgenes* 72). In the museum, Pastor Mellado adds, far more brutally, “any object that enters there undergoes a civic burial, approaching in its practice of conservation the administration of a morgue; with the cadavers, of course, awaiting their autopsy.” But does anyone still believe, we may ask, that museums provide absolute immunity from change, temporality and contingency? It would seem that no one really buys the notion that museums represent refuges from historical “pollution.” Yet is not the perpetual interdiction to touch the artwork evidence that on a cultural level this fantasy is still very much alive? So long as this tactile (and overall sensorial) interdiction persists, and so long as the artwork is displayed under the conditions and prerogatives of distance, isolation, and singularity, the fantasy of an ahistoric and atemporal sanctuary (which is nothing less than an instantiation of the archival fantasy, of the “archive fever” which Derrida speaks about) persists and mediates each and every approach to the artwork (to the artwork, of course, held and hosted [held as hostage?] by the archive).

associated with the Airmail Paintings: instead of flight, movement, and travel, the oil-spill incarnates immobility and a radical fixation to place; it crosses no great distance, but merely oozes out of a barrel in order to be sucked in by the sand and dirt: the distance that it traverses is thus minimal. It renounces the space of the museum just as vehemently as it renounces spectatorship and accessibility: the only approach we have to it is through the mediated access of a video recording,¹⁰⁹ since no one but the author and whoever recorded the event (assuming Dittborn had assistance) could claim to have witnessed it firsthand. If the Airmail Paintings must ultimately be brought down to earth, the oil-spill is always already an inhabitant of the earth, albeit seemingly out of place, parasitic and uninvited. If the Airmail Paintings betray in their folds subtle signs of decay, the oil-spill is always already pure decay.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, whereas the Airmail Paintings incarnate a genre of art that is seemingly repeatable and non-exhaustive, the oil-spill constitutes an unrepeatable act, as in fact Dittborn's decision to abstain from replicating a similar performance makes evident. Spilling a barrel of oil—a high contaminant—on the landscape is not something one can do, or should do, very often—if at all. To have done it once already constituted, from an ecological standpoint, a great transgression.

¹⁰⁹ In a similar way to Zurita's earth poems, which can only be encountered in their photographic record. See Chapter Four.

¹¹⁰ A degenerated substance, moreover, that holds the potential to perpetuate its own degeneration; while it itself may no longer be able to degenerate further, it may certainly trigger, through its contact, the degeneration of something other than itself. In one word, it may *pollute*.

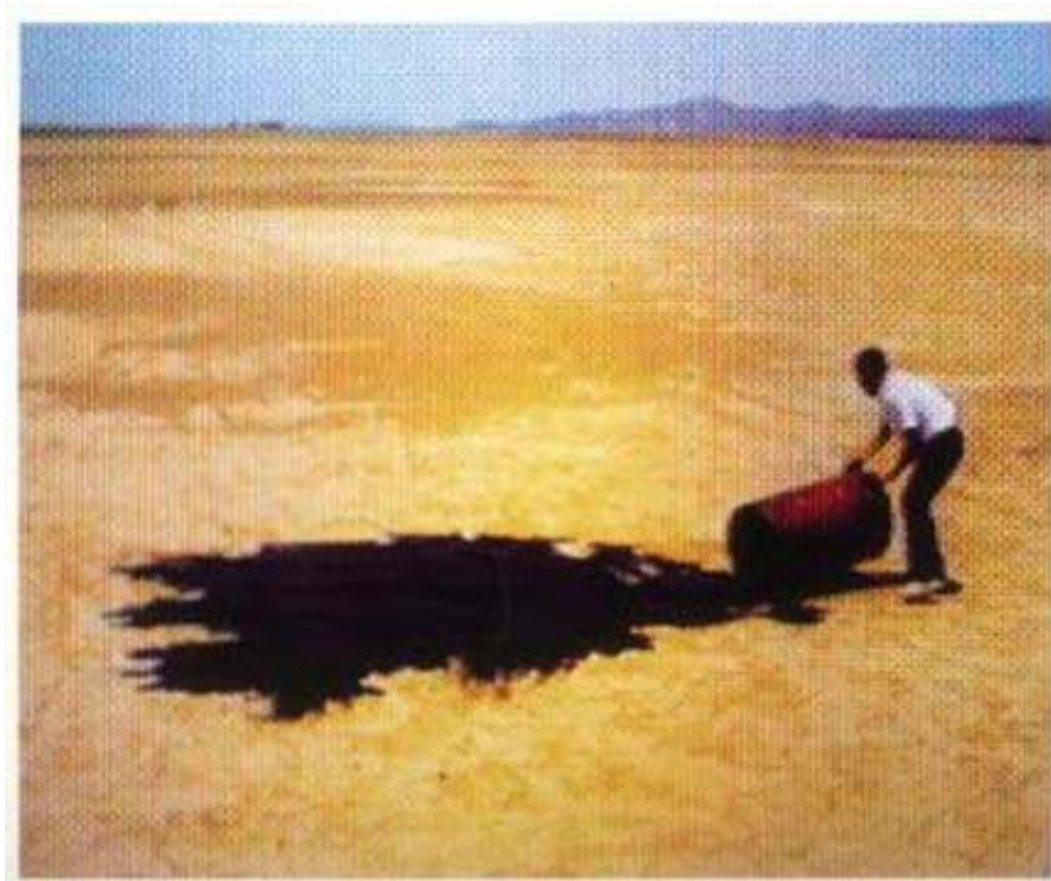


Figure 2. Oil spill, Dittborn's 1981 intervention on the Tarapacá Desert

The oil-spill, as stated before, constitutes one of Dittborn's earliest performances. Read in relation to his other artistic works, this intervention represents, in retrospect, a strange departure from a clear and relatively coherent trajectory. Video footage portrays Dittborn carrying out the intervention with a certain degree of clumsiness; absent is the elegance that we usually associate (perhaps naively) with artistic labor. The barrel of oil seems almost too heavy for the artist's strength. After he manages to tip it over, and as the oil oozes out onto the desert, Dittborn proceeds to spread the liquid out with his hands. In this way, Dittborn "signs" the work, inscribes his mark on the landscape.

While on an ecological or material register the oil-spill may constitute a

transgressive act, on an ideological level this performance was and is at all times subject to losing its transgressive potential by an appropriation on the part of the cultural institution. In emphasizing its contestatory function, the critical gesture in effect would suppress the work's materially-base aspects. This suppression of matter is perhaps inevitable if one wishes to interpret, read, or give sense to the work in the first place. My own interpretation will attempt to resist the regret of this material loss; in other words, to resist the temptation of celebrating the work's original purity, even in its disguised modality *as* impurity. Postulating the category of impurity as an authentic means by which to qualify the work, by which to grant it its very identity, runs the risk of turning impurity into a new kind of purity. When one speaks of impurity as something immune from or predating theoretical intervention, one has already turned that impurity into something fundamentally pure (because anterior, closed off, or resistant to language). Despite its "irresponsible" character, the oil-spill may thus be appropriated into the sphere of culture. Its transgression may thus prove short-lived. No artwork can sustain an infinite transgression; calling it *transgressive* already domesticates and diminishes its force. To put it differently, there is a shift from performativity to installation, from art as performance to art as the arrest of performance. A parallel shift occurs between the quick time of the performance and the slow time of its interpretation. As performative, the art-situation still antedates critical appropriation (though this itself is debatable), and thus may still be qualified as a purely transgressive act. As a critical object, that is, as recuperated by a theoretical or critical framework, the oil-spill is metaphorically contained; it falls into the economy of critical discourse.

In the end, the oil-spill undergoes a process parallel to that of *testimonio* in the 1980s and 90s. Initially, *testimonio* positioned itself at an uncomfortable place with respect to established literary genres. *Testimonio* spoke on behalf of the abject subjects of Latin America while presenting itself as an abject genre.¹¹¹ It was encountered as an essentially impure object, one which combined a number of literary and non-literary techniques, ranging from autobiography, interview, oral discourse, and ethnography. Yet *testimonio*'s marginal and impure position was short-lived, for it quickly became an established, canonic genre, losing in its transit from the social to the academic fields its initially subversive potential. *Testimonio* became the name for a counter-discourse that eventually became institutionalized; an enemy of the Classics that itself became a Classic; a homeless body that found a comfortable home in the literary museum; a deterritorialized and nomadic genre that was reterritorialized and transformed into a sedentary monument.¹¹²

Like the literary establishment in regards to *testimonio*, the art/critical establishment can sublimate the oil-spill, thereby cancelling its potential subversiveness. This otherwise filthy act can be turned into a clean one. By granting

¹¹¹ George Yúdice refuses to read *testimonio* through the lens of "abjection," which he defines negatively as "postmodernism's privileged aesthetic principle." Abjection, in his opinion, disregards the real suffering experienced by marginalized subjects, positing instead the category of "horror" and its shock-effect as a feeling that "excites the [Western] writer" and that ultimately becomes a "self-reflection on [the writer's] own alienated vision." Read with an emphasis on abjection, *testimonio* ends up becoming a radically narcissistic genre, one which would thus contradict two of its most-often asserted goals: the production of empathy and of solidarity. An example of a text that falls into the trap of abjection may be found, according to Yúdice, in Joan Didion's purportedly "'testimonial' reportage" titled *Salvador* ("Testimonio and Postmodernism" 51-53).

¹¹² I draw most of these dichotomies from Gugelberger's Introduction to *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America* (1-19), which provides a fascinating account of the rise and fall of *testimonio* in Latin America. The anthology includes important essays in defense and critical of the genre. To my mind, the strongest argument in favor of *testimonio* is still John Beverley's classic essay "The Margin at the Center," while the most serious drawbacks are enunciated in Alberto Moreiras' "The Aura of Testimonio" (both included in *The Real Thing*).

it the predicate of *art*, the work is immediately substantiated with meaning and placed within the redemptory space of the artistic archive. It no longer needs to be defended. Insofar as it speaks of something else, insofar as this stain on the desert is supposed to represent something other than itself (a commentary on the nation¹¹³), the oil-spill ceases to be regarded as a reckless and irresponsible act in order to become an acceptable and even valiant one. The oil-spill will not be granted the privilege of constituting an end unto itself. Interpretation will justify, sanitize, and even redeem it.¹¹⁴ True filth lays not in the performance, but in that which the performance represents: the repressive State. Dittborn's hands may be stained with oil, but in reality they are meant to signal the morally-tainted hands of the nation's political leaders.

The oil-spill situates itself at a politically crucial moment in Chile's history—halfway through the duration of the military regime. Its taking place in the desert, that is to say, in a territory geographically removed from the political and social center, in

¹¹³ “If the stain warns of the censorship which suppresses all violence in the oblivion of its memory, the conscious act of the stain in Dittborn's work is today strategic inasmuch as it denounces our national historical present as a vast fringe of censorship, bringing up [*remanece*] on this fringe its (our) victimized objects / its (our) tumors / its (our) traumatic kernels” (Richard, *Una mirada* 25).

¹¹⁴ Pablo Oyarzún makes this precise claim in regards to the redemptive gesture by which Nelly Richard, from her position as the more or less official critic of the Chilean radical Left, rescues and unifies a great number of neo avant-garde artists under the rubric of “Escena de avanzada.” In Oyarzún's words, Richard's is a “complex gesture by which she rescues the production of the *escena de 'avanzada'* (while simultaneously rescuing herself as its most loyal witness, and as something beyond a mere witness, we have already pointed this out), and which unavoidably historicizes this ‘scene’ and sanctions it as past, transforming it into a witness of itself—with the monumental effect that, willingly or not, this produces” (162). Similarly, Willy Thayer indicates that “*Escena de Avanzada* names, before anything, Nelly Richard's textual production on the visual arts in Chile from the end of the sixties to roughly 1983. Her texts, in those years, constituted the original development and subsequent coinage of this name; to cite it is to cite the signature of a series of essays that, as a whole, constitute this concept's fluctuating process of elaboration, which today circulates as common currency and as part of the modernizing and canonizing interpretation undertaken by *Márgenes e Instituciones*” (“Crítica” 65). And in regards specifically to Dittborn, Richard again stands as the first—and therefore privileged—interlocutor of his work, as the one on which is placed the imperatives to theorize, interpret, defend, and consecrate: “Nelly Richard,” Pastor Mellado reminds, “is the first addressee of an Airmail Painting [Richard receives the first Airmail Painting while at the XII Paris Biennale, in 1982].”

no way constitutes an escapist gesture; on the contrary, if it “flees” into the desert, it is to push this territory into the political realm, or, what amounts to same, to introduce the mark of the political into the ostensibly uncontaminated space of the desert. The oil spill symbolically underscores its groundedness through its material unfolding: its radical “locality” is reflected in the way in which oil adheres more or less permanently to the surface. The image of the stain is an age-old symbol used to represent guilt.¹¹⁵ In staining the desert, Dittborn therefore marks the nation as collectively stained and as metaphorically guilty. Like Zurita in *Anteparaiso* (to whose work I will refer in the following chapter), the oil stain marks the impossibility of singling out a Just One from amongst the members of the community. The stubbornness exhibited by the stain in its refusal to be sanitized suggests that the nation’s guilt will prove just as difficult, if not impossible, to cleanse. The stain may be physically erased, wiped out by natural erosion—just as guilt may be extinguished by either amnesia or absolution, by an officially-sanctioned discourse of reconciliation—yet its trace will forever haunt the memory of the body that bore it: in this case, the national body incarnated in the figure of the desert. Anticipating future debates over memory, culpability, restitution, and forgiveness, Dittborn’s work warns against the seducing pull of amnesia, against the temptation to erase the desert stain in order to return the landscape—and, by extension, the community—to a natural, pure state—as if to claim, on behalf of the symbolically “reborn” community, an innocence that would have been lost during the dictatorship but which would have been miraculously recuperated in a future time. The stain, on the contrary, suggests that no such purity or innocence existed in the first

¹¹⁵ See Ricoeur 33-39.

place.¹¹⁶

The political employment of the concept of purity is, of course, a well-known recourse in both dictatorial and democratic regimes. The Chilean dictatorship, for instance, predictably subordinated the *clean* under the umbrella sign of *order*. Thus, José Joaquín Brunner explains the self-attributed role of the dictatorship as a labor of “purification of society; the removal of evil; the extirpation of the cancer corroding the social body” (90). The original and most harmful agent of disease became, expectedly, Marxist ideology as embodied by Allende’s government; after its overthrow, it became any subject sympathetic to the former regime and, more generally, any form of political or aesthetic dissident. To achieve this goal—the imposition of total order, the coercive manipulation of societal discourse to mirror official discourse, the construction of a “healthy” body politic—the dictatorship undertook a series of interventions whose ultimate task was to make the social space conform to the idea of an ordered, unblemished society, unmarked by politically-subversive ideologies. If ever the dictatorship had a “lyric” desire, this wish was nothing less than to transform the nation into a desert, a space radically devoid of political contestation. In order to give the image of a clean and controlled social body, the dictatorship resorted to concrete as well as symbolic acts of violence: it “cover[ed] up the cadavers with lime; drop[ped] them into the water [the sea]; order[ed] the physical disappearance of agents of evil; clean[ed] up graffitied walls; enforce[d]

¹¹⁶ The question of whether to interpret the dictatorship as a parenthesis, a hiatus, a break in the linear progression of democracy, and thus as an anomaly, a disruption, itself a stain in the unstoppably expanding field of liberal democracy, constitutes a debate unto itself. See in particular Willy Thayer’s explication of the coup, inspired by Patricio Marchant, as an “inverted parenthesis” (“El Golpe” 20-22), as well as Nelly Richard’s opposition between the art created in exile and the art created locally during the dictatorship, where the former conceives of History as plenitude and teleology, and the latter conceives of history as fragmented and shattered (*Márgenes* 22).

schedules and designate[d] zones where traffic [was] prohibited; emptie[d] the streets of noise and presences; survey[ed] the nocturnal space from the air; mark[ed] bodies; impose[d] exile and incarcerate[d]. It passe[d] negative judgment on any form of societal overflow” (Brunner 90).¹¹⁷

The dictatorship went to great extents to “eliminate cultural expressions from the Unidad Popular, promoting the destruction and replacement of images on walls and papers, changing street names, erupting with new audio stimuli and visual movements proper to a military context” (Errázuriz 137). Thus,

as soon as the military seized control there began an operation of cleansing of walls, streets, parks, and overall urban space. Soon after the coup, the official press announced this process through *El mercurio*, calling for popular support in the following way: “the Government has announced its decision to undertake a *process that will restore the image of cleanliness and order* which once defined the nation’s Capital. *The population must not only support, but collaborate in this initiative.*” (Errázuriz 140; author’s emphasis)¹¹⁸

As an intervention that literally overflows, and that in overflowing contaminates the soil, the oil-spill contradicts the dictatorial principle of obsessive

¹¹⁷ Nelly Richard equally highlights the dictatorship’s insistence on order and purity, stating that “to put in order and call to order are the routinizing slogans through which a regime of (brute and institutional) force feigns an appeal to constructive rationality, in order to disguise the arbitrary cuts of its destructive violence. This appeal reiterates, with each framing formula, the regime’s role as guardian of a fixed repertoire of inalterable values. These values are to be defended, against the threat of disorder’s specter as chaos, through purifying-decontaminating rites that expel the ‘other’ (the dissimilar) from the semantic universe governed by the equation Order = Purity, guarantor of homogeneity and transparency” (*The Insubordination* 41).

¹¹⁸ Errázuriz provides two further examples of this sanitizing imperative: on 26 September 1973, the municipality of Las Barrancas issued the following decree: “It is hereby ordered that buildings’ façades must be clean, as well as all walls and fences within the municipality of Las Barrancas. Therefore, slogans, posters, and marks of any political or partisan nature must be erased, such that the community may give a general appearance of order and cleanliness” (142). On 9 June 1975, Santiago’s mayor, María Eugenia Oyarzún, issued a decree by which “the use of *the color black and of any other color of a violent nature is hereby prohibited on walls*, such that the general harmony is not disturbed” (qtd. in Errázuriz 142; author’s emphasis).

administration.¹¹⁹ It counteracts its implicit project of “desertification,” a project by which the nation, like the desert, would present itself as a space devoid of political expression. The unfinished trauma of the dictatorship, Dittborn suggests, no longer allows us to look at the desert as an untainted, ahistorical landscape. The desert is no longer sublime, if by sublime one means the exclusion of human subjectivity and of historical contingency. Neither can it be witnessed from a purely aesthetic perspective. No longer is the desert the region of the neutral or of muteness. Dittborn pollutes the desert, and in doing so underscores the nation as inherently divided and its natural geography as politically marked.

Beyond situating itself at odds with the authoritarian vision of a healthy body politic, which—driven by the imperative to impose the image of a prosperous and ordered society—erases all marks of difference, the oil-spill contests a certain conceptual tradition that imagines the desert as a realm divorced from language and signification, or, to be more precise, from writing.

In truth, the desert may be qualified, at best, as an ambivalent space in Western thinking, a space that harbors the potential to arouse both positive and negative connotations. John Beck, for instance, underscores particular elements associated with the cultural construction of the American desert—a construction partly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although his analysis focuses on the North American landscape, much of what he points out, I believe, holds true for the cultural

¹¹⁹ Although this part of my discussion focuses mainly on art in relation to dictatorship, I should once again point out that regulation is not a feature exclusive to dictatorship or totalitarian regimes. The modern democratic state is also immensely bureaucratic, and therefore possesses an intensely regulatory drive. “Habitus” names the process by which a State’s institutional apparatus and regulatory commands (laws) become internalized by its citizens, thus allowing—as Foucault perhaps would say—for the gradual emergence of a self-disciplined civil society.

representation of the Latin American and Chilean deserts. Beck writes that in Hebrew the word *tohu* refers to both “desert” and “chaos,” while the more ambiguous *bohu* denotes “emptiness, desolation, formlessness, confusion” (63). Pairing both words together gives rise to expressions such as “desert and desolation, chaos and confusion, ‘without form and void,’ as it is translated in Genesis.” While these adjectives appear to qualify the desert as an essentially negative space, Beck points out that “without form” is nonetheless also synonymous with limitless potentiality. Insofar as it predates form and content, the desert signifies a space in which creative agency (the act of granting form and content) can prosper, and thus the very space in which “God performs His differentiating acts—dividing earth from sky, sea from land, day from night” (64). While principally connoting chaos and sterility, the desert simultaneously becomes the “place for boundless free play,” for “unhindered experimentation.” This list of positive values increases when the desert incorporates the possibility of escaping the “confinements of convention,” in other words, when the desert is seen as an invitation to solitarily partake in a radical kind of liberty, a liberty that would imply an absolute break from civilization, since the desert, as it is commonly thought, refuses to concede to the realm of culture—unlike, for instance, “the pastoral middle landscape . . . which mediates and synthesizes ‘civilized’ and ‘wild’” (75). The desert, furthermore, frustrates rationality and cognition, subverting the traditional trope that reads light as the ally of Reason: cloudless and bathed in abundant light, the desert is also the site of illusion, hallucination and mirage; its visual trickery overturns phenomenal inquiry (71-72). Put in these terms, the desert becomes a strongly “resistant” terrain; as such, it feeds our fantasies of counteracting cognitive and/or

political assimilation, becoming, among other things, the privileged “trope of counterhegemonic space of liberation from U.S. empire-building” (75).

While all these attributes seem to render the desert as inherently “ungraspable,” as precluding domination or colonization, the desert has nonetheless been historically all-too-graspable a place. The characteristics of radical separateness and emptiness, which lend the desert its supposedly resistant character, are nonetheless the very concepts used to justify its political appropriation. A view that sees the desert as radically vacant (socially, culturally, and/or productively) may also conceal, willingly or not, the prior inscriptions made on its material and symbolic topography (by, for instance, previous native inhabitants). Ultimately, “speculators and aesthetes alike need the tropes of emptiness and uselessness in order to validate their construction of the landscape as available space” (Beck 66). Progress and development will justify their tasks much more easily if the landscape is imagined as culturally barren, since nothing could be said to have been destroyed in the civilizing expansion of the dominating group. I’m not suggesting that viewing the desert as always-already inscribed or written-upon will immunize it from ideological or colonial appropriation, only that, historically, such projects have chosen to frame and validate their projects by having recourse to this dialectical relationship between emptiness and fullness, which argues for the necessity to substantiate the desert’s supposed emptiness with the presumed fullness of civilization.

As is well known, this dialectics became translated in Latin America—particularly in the Southern Cone—by the names of *civilization* and *barbarism*, while its operative or active unfolding came to be known as the “conquest of the desert.” A

Sarmiento-inspired political tradition projected the desert's fundamental emptiness onto the *pampa*—to the extent of making the two spaces synonymous with each other; it positioned itself as the site of power and authority. Civilization put forth its saturated, authoritative sign, against which the desert, in turn, opposed its own barren and rebellious sign. Under this equation, the city became the center from which writing in general and the written Law in particular were produced, and which were then imposed on the empty grid of the landscape. The human consequences, as well as the intellectual debates that have emerged as a result of this operation, are well known, and I will not rehearse them here. What is important to reiterate is that the struggle between civilization and barbarism—with its resultant theorization of the desert—attained its conceptual strength, as well as its political support, from the premise that the desert constituted an intrinsically atemporal and ahistorical space, qualifications which, by the logic of this thinking, translated into backward, barbaric, and therefore in need of civilization's redemptive intervention.

This paradigm is in some ways replicated by recent art criticism. To remain close to my object of interest, suffice it to look at the views pertaining to nature and its relationship to artistic expression offered in an important Chilean journal, *Aisthesis* (edited by the Instituto de Estética at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile). On the same year (1982) in which Dittborn produced his *Historia de la física* (which includes footage of the oil-spill) *Aisthesis* published two articles dealing with the relationship between art and nature. “Arte y naturaleza” and “Materiales para una estética del entorno,” by Gastón Soubllette and Fidel Sepúlveda Llanos, respectively, attempted to shed light on the difficult relationship between artistic expression

and landscape (which Sepulveda refers to interchangeably as “ecology” and “environment” [*entorno*]).

The starting premise in both articles is the same: Nature, described as anterior to humanity, is synonymous with plenitude: it has no lack; humanity, on the other hand, is synonymous with lack and desire. Nature is a self-perpetuating stasis; humanity, a desiring errantry. “Nature,” Soubllette writes (inspired by Jung, to whom references abound), “projects its vital forms in total congruence with its own archetypes of perfection” (37). Beauty, which can only be adequately perceived in Nature, is the result of this perfect equivalence between Nature’s archetypal projections and its concrete phenomenal manifestations. “The universe,” it follows, “is beautiful in an absolute way.” In relation to Nature’s self-sufficiency, the artwork occupies an inferior and subordinate position; it attempts to replicate the identity between form and archetype found in Nature. As the product of a fallen and divided species, art is “susceptible to aesthetic valorisation” (Nature, on the other hand, and insofar as always accomplished, transcends aesthetic and ethical judgements). For Soubllette, Nature’s beauty and congruence thus becomes the standard by which to judge the human artwork: “it will be understood that precisely the greater or lesser value of an artwork stands in direct proportion to the greater or lesser equivalence which its creative process holds with respect to nature’s work” (37).

Sepulveda—who like Soubllette describes humanity as *fallen*—argues that the fundamental task of the artwork is one of reparation, renovation, and healing. If separation describes humanity’s essential condition, then the true ecological/aesthetic/ethical act would suture the rift between the terrestrial and the

human: “Ecology, ethics and aesthetics agree, from their respective positions, on showing the possibility, necessity and urgency of going forth into the encounter of ourselves and of otherness,” and doing so “with an attitude [that would be] new or renewing, foundational or perhaps even restorative of something that we had *in illo tempore*, and that was lost at some point in space or time” (11); similarly, “a vision of the cosmos structured under the sign of correlation [*vinculación*], would reinstate to man a more creative, presencializing [*presencializador*], dialogic, and integrative mode of relation with the environment” (17).

The positions outlined by both Sepúlveda and Soubllette may have spoken to and on behalf of a certain artistic community (intriguingly enough, both authors refrain from mentioning any contemporary artists, Chilean or otherwise). Yet in relation to that community with whom Dittborn associated himself (“Escena de avanzada”), there exists an evident and tremendous distance. In an almost uncanny way, however, and perhaps by its very omission, it is as though both Soubllette and Sepúlveda speak directly to and about this type of art. One may perceive in both Soubllette’s and Sepúlveda’s respective theories a common aversion toward excess, toward the fragmentary trace that escapes and undermines restoration, humanity’s reconnection with Nature. A natural act, which for Soubllette functions as the standard by which to measure a creative one, allows for no excess in its constitution, and is thus by definition a necessary act (it could not have been or come about otherwise). This means that everything about the natural event, everything that contributed to its emergence, was fully subordinated to and integrated into the process of its constitution: no residue is produced. No remnant results as the result of the natural

act: the natural act is its own result. Just as in the ecologic sphere various elements must come together and subordinate themselves to the production of a natural act, in the social sphere the artwork must subordinate itself to the functionality and well-being of society: “Art is not elitist; even in its supreme manifestations, it is the expression of the social body . . . artworks are thus the useful and functional objects necessary to the life of the community” (41). Inasmuch as functional, as necessary for the sustainment of society, the “true” art work would not constitute an excess or surplus. Falsity arises when disruption, difference, and disharmony are foregrounded: when the artwork points to or enacts a separation rather than an emendation. This is what Soubllette sees as the driving motor of the “inaesthetic.” Whereas the necessary and truly creative work describes “a state of plenitude in which the empathy between man and the environment gives itself without an interference suggesting that life has become a problem” (44), the work produced under the sign of the “inaesthetic” obeys a “trivializing and destructive arbitrariness” (39), and is the inevitable product of a pathological subjectivity, of a “psychologically non-integrated consciousness” (44). For Soubllette, the contemporary aesthetic and social landscape seems hopelessly grim (note the emphasis on residual accumulation in what follows, as if the world had become an immense dumpster): “today the inaesthetic, as the materialization of a purely conscious thought, has filled the world with its monstrous, aggressive and desolate forms, constructing an entirely ‘fabricated’ environment for a being that conceives of life itself as a problem, as a violent conflict between man and nature, between man and man, and between man and himself” (44).

Sepúlveda is no less pessimistic. The planet, for him, is gradually “being left

without a tradition, and consequently without space or time, barren, purged; with more knowledge but with less wisdom” (15). If a reference to accumulation is already implicit in this quote (an *increase* in today’s knowledge is directly proportionate to a decrease in wisdom), it becomes the explicit horizon of existential revulsion in what follows: “The presence of the world resents the exuberance of pseudo-presences which translate into a saturation at the epidermal level, into an overpopulation of sounds, colours, smells, touches, forms and rhythms lacking a sense matrix [*circuito matriz del sentido*] that would order and hierarchize them” (20). Such theoretical dread of excess (something like the inverse of *horror vacui*) may be seen as another instantiation of a lyric desire for desertification, for rendering the world empty of any and all residual and potentially-political “pseudo-presences.”

It is easy enough to see how Dittborn’s understanding of nature’s relation to art differs from Soubllette’s and Sepúlveda’s conservative viewpoint. To their nostalgic view of nature—which posits the existence of humanity as the exception that disrupts the harmony of the cosmos and that forever mourns the loss of an original condition of beauty and plenitude—Dittborn exhibits a rather indifferent attitude with respect to ecology as a space of purity. In fact, Dittborn pollutes the desert in order to show that nature is always already polluted, that an original—and therefore subsequently lost—primordial innocence or wholeness is nothing more than a retroactive fantasy. In draining out the contents of the barrel, Dittborn thus simply adds pollution to pollution, inscription onto inscription, a new layer of writing onto a densely palimpsestous geography. In clear opposition to Soubllette’s and Sepúlveda’s desire to order, hierarchize, and evacuate the world of its needless detritus, Dittborn produces a

work that is *nothing but* detritus; and in clear distinction to their imperative for emendation, suturing and healing, Dittborn's work brings to the foreground—and is perhaps nothing but this act of violent foregrounding—the rift, hole or gap inherent in each and every reconciliatory enterprise: it highlights the impossibility of absolute suture.

Dittborn's intervention problematizes the proposition that aims to regard ecology, geography and the landscape (the desert) as fundamentally separated from the contingent realm of culture and writing. His intervention by no means imagines itself as a foundational mark (which I believe to be the case with the mark of civilization imposed on the “unwritten” landscape in the “civilization versus barbarism” conflict). Dittborn's action is simply a re-inscribing of/on the desert, always already untimely, belated in the sense that it fails to arrive first or before any other inscription. The oil-spill may thus be read as a supplement, as a written sign.¹²⁰ A sign whose sense—like all signs—emerges only contextually, in this case, in relation to both a cultural-artistic tradition and a complex political climate.

Oil as mark (both as it appears in the oil-spill intervention and in the Airmail Paintings), may be read as a sign addressed to a coming community, to a post-dictatorial society that Dittborn imagines as re-democratized. The figure of the stain, along with its symbolic register, would thus be presented as the figure with which the future community must contend with. This mark that symbolizes guilt and violence represents the un-erasable residue that discourses of reconciliation will seek to negate or cover over. Indeed, the post-1989 government will attempt to mend past

¹²⁰ Since the oil is essentially black, and the desert is both flat and yellowish, their contrast evokes a scene of writing, where the oil becomes ink and the desert functions as paper or writing surface.

contradictions by refusing to speak in a potentially-conflicted and disruptive vocabulary; instead, the transition government will use an “inoffensive” discourse in order to reference and negotiate with the past and to repair the nation’s present social tensions (Richard, *Residuos* 30-31). While acknowledging the wrongs of the dictatorship, the government will assume a reconciliatory policy and tone, which in certain instances will translate into a policy that advocates erasure, rebirth, and the figure of the tabula rasa as the means by which to reconstitute the fragmented nation. While the dictatorship embarked on a violent crusade of national purification whose principal targets were politically dissenting individuals and acts, the democratic government of the transition attempted, for its part, to purify the nation of potentially disruptive memories that would hamper the movement toward full socio-political suture.

Tomás Moulian reads the frantic and almost desperate strategy of erasure carried out under the democratic, conciliatory banner as a process of “whitening,” making reference to the vast metaphoric rhetoric of social and moral pollution. Negation at the singular, individual level grew into a nationwide project that discouraged discontent and unconformity (32). “Stability, it was argued, [had] to be bought at the price of silence” (33). “What sense was there in reviving pain? In reliving the nightmare? Why return to an issue that divides, that instills boredom or fear in those who already mourn or weep?” (33). Paradoxically, the figure of Pinochet—potentially the greatest obstacle for transition—did not undergo a metaphoric elimination under this process of “whitening.” Pinochet’s erasure from the social landscape, it was argued, posed a greater threat than his re-incorporation under a

different symbolic function. The paternal figure of the military dictator *had* to be somehow reintegrated into the new regime's program, lest the nation's democratic progress be compromised or interrupted. Stripped of his real political authority, Pinochet became the foundation of Chile's current prosperity:

In order for Chile to become a model and proof of "mature" capitalism's ability to become incorporated into democracy, its natural habitat . . . a "whitening" of Chile was required. This also required that Pinochet, the symbol par excellence of the military regime, the mediator [between social welfare and the capitalist method], not become the agent responsible for [the nation's] dirt and blood. Moreover, it was necessary that everyone else recognize the necessity of his role in the construction of Present-day Chile [*Chile Actual*]. The despotic man had to become the providential man. (Moulian 34)

Pinochet's presumed role in the nation's transition to democracy and economic prosperity may have diminished his visibility, yet it perpetuated his authority under a different guise. Pinochet became something like a father whose very absence intensified his authority. The transition attributed to him the status of an anchoring sign: "Pinochet as Necessity [*Pinochet Necesario*]: for the military, because he saves their honor, shields them from 'humiliation' and, most importantly, from responsibility. Pinochet as Necessity: for the transition, because without him (it was said) the sleeping beasts would reawaken" (Moulian 36). It was thus thought that the preservation of this military father-figure would benefit both the old and the new political protagonists, deterring any possible re-insurrection on the part of the armed forces while acting as a figure on which the military's collective guilt could be channeled.¹²¹

¹²¹ For an interesting article on the symbolic and political significance of Pinochet's corpse (he died in 2006 while under house arrest), see Lazzara, "Pinochet's Cadaver." The powerful symbolic weight of Pinochet's corpse gave rise to two opposing positions: on the one hand, those who believed that

The process by which Pinochet's image was cleverly recodified to appear as beneficial and even indispensable—and which Moulian interprets as obeying a political logic of whitening or purifying the nation's image (if previously the Marxist mark was the stigma, now it was the dictatorial mark), brings me to a discussion of the post-dictatorial political landscape. To explore this issue, I would like to focus on an artistic installation sanctioned by the democratic regime, and by means of which the nation sought to portray internationally an affirmative and pure image of itself. The artistic installation I will discuss (an iceberg showcased at Expo Seville in 1992) conveys, both literally and symbolically, the exact opposite message to the oil figuring in Dittborn's work. If the dictatorship, as suggested earlier, attempted to turn the nation into a politically- and artistically-evacuated desert, the democratic government sought to have the nation conform to the transparency and purity of a natural block of ice.

The Iceberg: Political Transition and Transparency

From 20 April to 12 October 1992, the Spanish city of Seville—more precisely, the island located along the Guadalquivir river known as La Cartuja—became the site of a Universal Exposition (“The Age of Discoveries”) in which more than one hundred countries showcased each a sample of its cultural heritage. Like all expositions of this scale, the event was generally celebratory. Through the impressive and monumental size of the pavilions, the cultural coexistence of nations on a limited space, the overcoming of practical obstacles pertaining to the transportation and

Pinochet's “cadaver is what Chile needs to acknowledge, address, and rectify,” and those who believed that “it must stay forgotten, an unvisited ruin, so as not to disrupt a fragile present” (132).

construction of each project, Expo-Seville displayed and corroborated the seemingly inevitable victory of technology, progress, and multiculturalism. It became the visual embodiment of Fukuyama's contemporary proclamation, in *The End of History and the Last Man* (also published in 1992), of Western liberal democracy's triumph. For some countries, most notably non-European ones bearing the stigma of underdevelopment and backwardness, an event of such a wide-scale promotion and projection represented a rare chance to contest these very stereotypes, an uncommon opportunity to partake, for a brief moment and in the same temporal and spatial coordinates, in the "feast of civilization."

The organizing committee extended an invitation to both African and Latin American countries. The location chosen for the Exposition, as well as the year in which it took place, (1992) were greatly significant. The latter for obvious reasons: Expo-Seville commemorated the five hundredth anniversary of America's encounter by the Europeans. The importance of the host venue was also significant: in La Cartuja is located the monastery of Santa María de las Cuevas, where Christopher Columbus planned his second journey to the "New World," and where his remains were housed for a brief period before their 1542 transfer to Santo Domingo. Other powerfully-symbolic decisions included the construction of a special section dedicated to the gold of Latin America, as well as the construction on the part of the host country of a so-called "Pavilion of the Americas," to be used by those countries that, for economic reasons, could not afford to construct their own exhibition areas. The organizing committee either did not foresee the potential controversy in these decisions, or simply chose to ignore them. On the contrary, the overall setup was

hailed as a microcosm of the contemporary world's spirit of discovery, conciliation, and international cooperation. To put it cynically, what Europe said to Latin America in particular was this: five hundred years ago we discovered you, thereby allowing you to enter into the irrevocable movement of universal history; today, five centuries later, we renew that gesture by allowing you to enter into the equally irreversible movement of globalization.

As one of the countries participating in the exposition, Chile constructed a pavilion that would prove greatly controversial and which gave rise to numerous intellectual and critical debates regarding its presumed intent to provide the illusion of a resurrected, reconciled, and politically-transparent nation. The interior of its pavilion consisted of two seemingly unrelated components: on the one hand, a publicity-inspired section that juxtaposed, through the use of photography and advertising tools, the old and the new, “folklore and the market, oral discourse and telecommunications, premodernity and postmodernity” (Richard, *Residuos* 171). This section was meant to give the impression of an economically-attractive and culturally-assured nation, a nation that had managed to successfully reconcile its cultural past with its current modernity. Through its overt celebration of market culture, this portion of the pavilion redeemed the economic policies of the dictatorship, thanks to which, by most accounts, the nation had experienced an economic boom unprecedented in its own history and unrivaled by any other Latin American country.



Figure 3. Chilean Pavilion, Expo Seville 1992

Yet, as Richard points out, the link with the dictatorship (i.e. with its uncomfortable past) could not be made explicit, and this is where the second facet of the pavilion—the iceberg—came into play. In Richard’s words:

While it is true that the dictatorial past preserved a link with the market policies that defined the image given by Chile in Seville, it was important not to make obvious this connection with such a problematic past. For this purpose, it was necessary to wipe off the image of “Present-day Chile” from all mnemonic residues and to simulate the rebirth of a transfiguration: a rebirth represented by the iceberg which, “cleansed, sanitized, and purified by its long voyage through the Sea,” attempted to promote the belief that “it was as if Chile had just been born.” (*Residuos* 168)¹²²

The infamous iceberg to which Richard refers came from the Chilean Antarctic Province. Weighing approximately 60 tons, it was transported by boat in a journey that lasted a full month. In reality, the iceberg exhibited as the Chilean pavilion’s centerpiece was comprised of various smaller pieces put together to form a unified block, given the technological and mechanical impossibility of extracting and storing a single immense block. Great lengths were taken to acclimate both the boat and the

¹²² The text quoted by Richard is from Tomás Moulian’s *Chile actual*.

pavilion space in order to prevent the massive ice-chunk from melting prematurely. Harbored inside an insulated and protective glass casing, the iceberg's life was prolonged by an artificial air-current kept at -8°C ; meanwhile, the iceberg's frozen core was traversed by a network of pipes through which a mixture of water and antifreezer circulated at -15°C . Great lengths were taken, of course, to conceal this entire life-support system (CRISIS).



Figure 4. Iceberg, Chilean Pavilion, Expo Seville 1992

Richard has written what is perhaps the most mordant critique of this natural/artificial monument. As she mentions correctly, the Chilean pavilion in which it was housed represented much more than a mere contribution to a world's fair. Having just reemerged from its dictatorial experience, Chile had had few opportunities

to present its new façade to the rest of the world. Expo-Seville became the locus of opportunity to do precisely that; as such, the showcase served the double purpose of solidifying a newly-forged national identity and of promoting internationally the government's official "discourse of change" and transparency (163). The pavilion incarnated a double desire for the nation: to show itself to the international democratic community, and, more importantly, to show its own spectacular image to itself.¹²³ Like the rest of the pavilions, Chile's obeyed a logic of exhibition meant to seduce and feed the visual appetite of the spectator with visions and objects both monumental and exotic. It mattered little if the claim to modernization and progress had been concretely achieved; what mattered was to give that very impression in the form of pristine and attractive images: "the Newness to be exhibited on the shelves of international modernity did not signify a real achievement, but simply displayed the *image* of Chile as a hyper-realization attesting to its official transit toward democracy" (165). The pavilion at Expo-Seville may thus be described as an immense visual "advertisement" functioning under the mandate of a "discourse of ostentation" whose purpose was to display the originality and particularity of a society through visually-extravagant means.

In her reading, Richard points out that the iceberg alluded to the famous opening scene in *Cien años de soledad* (1967), where José Arcadio Buendía sees and touches an ice-block for the first time in his life. The Chilean pavilion, however, reversed this scene of discovery: instead of the ice being imported into a small

¹²³ The Chilean government decided to construct its own pavilion rather than using the "Pavilion of the Americas," which the Spanish government built to be collectively used by the countries of this region (ST 13).

underdeveloped country of Latin America, it was here exported to the developed First World. The awe produced by technology in García Márquez's novel was replaced in the exposition by the awe inspired by a primitive, premodern and virgin natural object, one of whose effects would be the exoticization of the continent in the eyes of the European beholder (174-175). Moreover, the "coldness" incarnated by the ice-block was supposed to contest one of the foundational stereotypes associated with Latin America: the assumption that it is a continent marked by chaos and irrationality: "coldness is opposed to warmth just as rationality is opposed to irrationality and the civilized to the barbaric" (175). More importantly, the iceberg was meant to stand as an object "without antecedents," an object that would substitute the nation's violent past for an innocent one, that would refuse to incorporate the traumatic and awkward memory of recent events within its phenomenal boundaries; in short, the iceberg stood as a virgin object, decontextualized and ahistorical. To be specific, the historically embarrassing events which the project's creators wished to conceal were the brief socialist government of the early 70s and the military dictatorship that followed (175).

In the absence of this historical past, the iceberg sought to recuperate a more sublime one, which its organizers hoped would prove not only unproblematic, but foundational: the immemorial and inhuman past of Nature as embodied in one of its "creations." Not only would this past escape historical contingency; it would also serve as a mythic foundation for the nation's "rebirth"; as itself the embodiment of this time of innocence, the iceberg stood as an emblem for the nation's resurrection into innocence. It is significant that this object had to be sought and extracted from the geographical frontiers of the nation (the Chilean Antarctic region), in other words,

from the territory furthest removed from the social center. Its geographic distance originally placed the iceberg at a region isolated from political debates and sheltered from potential ideological contagion. Inasmuch as it emerged from the order of nature rather than that of history, the iceberg preceded the corruption of the letter. An autonomous object, it was meant not to reference the nation's wounds, but its rebirth into innocence.

The apolitical claim is nonetheless still a political claim. Likewise, the claim to autonomy does not necessarily render its object (artistic or natural) autonomous. From an artistic viewpoint, remoteness of origin and natural transparency signified the iceberg's ability to stand clear of the socio-political realm. Transparency rendered the iceberg into a form of transcendental art. Nonetheless, and like Dittborn's Airmail Paintings, the iceberg was ultimately "weighed" and brought down to the muddy field of politics. In the attempt to avoid the muddiest of these fields, the committee that organized Chile's pavilion appealed to a transnational political reading, one that would avoid treading in the Chilean political arena. The committee thus appealed to a global politics.

The iceberg's political statement was to make the international community aware of the dangers of global warming. Although the Chilean committee understood that this statement diverged from the official theme of the Exposition ("The Age of Discoveries")¹²⁴, it nonetheless felt that global warming demanded international

¹²⁴ The iceberg, however, did fit nicely into the official theme of the Exposition. As an emblem of one of the last terrestrial frontiers yet to be conquered by humankind (the Polar Regions), it spoke to the "Age of Discoveries" narrative. The iceberg appealed to the fantasy of frontier travel and to the hunger for the discovery and exploitation of future natural resources. According to one reader, the iceberg, aleph-like, incorporated a fragment of every conceivable geographic difference found within the nation;

attention. Augusto Aninat, the executive in charge of the project, explains the iceberg's consciousness-raising objective in the following way:

The idea is not to attempt to hide our environmental problems, but to show what is being done to confront them, be it in regards to smog in Santiago, to mining, to the forest sector, to fruit- and horticulture, or to the challenges related to fishing. Our image as a country of delicacies, of natural riches, last confine of the world, and of the other [aspects] to be projected, suggests that to be able to preserve these advantages we must assume an increasingly stronger commitment to our environment. (qtd. in ST 14)

I am by no means suggesting that global warming is a trivial issue (if anything, global warming is perhaps today an even more pressing menace than it was in 1992).

Following Richard, I am more interested in analyzing the possible reasons for having chosen this topic (global warming) and this object (the iceberg) for a world's fair—as if any other topic would have proven too uncomfortable to deal with at that particular moment in the nation's historical conjuncture. If a Universal Exposition is meant to present each participating country with a rare opportunity to display the uniqueness of that country's identity or cultural heritage, then the fact that Chile opted to highlight an ostensibly global challenge is suspiciously telling. This decision afforded the Chilean government a double victory: on the one hand, it provided a reason to avoid an overt reference to the nation, which found itself in the process of overcoming its recent embarrassing history; on the other, it positioned Chile at the vanguard of an increasingly global concern. The iceberg's transpolitical stance allowed it to become immune to any excessive contextualization, that is, to a specifically-national, dirtier, and embarrassing reading.

in it, the globalized, tourism-hungry observer could see “a country that preserved vast planetary reserve regions [as well as] a territory for unparalleled adventures and voyages: deserts, glaciers, thousands of scarcely explored islands and channels; the cold rainforests of the South; vast snowy mountains; 5000 kilometers of Pacific coast; Antarctica; Easter Island” (ST 15).

Yet this is precisely what occurred. The attempt to shield the iceberg from a political reading proved ineffective; if the iceberg pretended to be immunized from external forces, I may add—using Derrida’s concept—that the iceberg was also autoimmunized; in other words, while it may have been protected from the outside, it was not necessarily protected from itself.¹²⁵ In the end, the iceberg was turned into an object laden with signification, a textual phenomenon embodying contradictory and almost inexhaustible senses; it was endlessly read, analyzed, interpreted, marked, stigmatized, and/or celebrated. It was unable to remain autonomous and self-referential. Neither was its interpretation confined to a mere statement on global warming. Instead, the critics involved in the polemic treated the iceberg as a radically contextualized object, one whose immediate circumstances—the site of its manifestation as well as the political and social environment of its production—could not be overlooked.

The critical operation deployed by thinkers such as Nelly Richard with respect to the iceberg has something very much in common with the performative operation deployed by Dittborn with respect to the desert: the textualization (i.e. the politicization) of a natural object or space that may be initially and advantageously divorced from historicity. Dittborn refuses to see the desert as a terrain unmarked by human temporality and immune from historical violence; likewise, Richard refuses to idolatry the iceberg as a translucent and unblemished monument that references nothing save its own transparency. Thus, Dittborn inscribes the desert with the written

¹²⁵ Jacques Derrida uses the term “autoimmunity” to describe the current “War on Terror” as a product of the United States’ actions during and after the Cold War (in other words, as yet another case of the Dr. Frankenstein scenario, where the doctor creates the very monsters that it fights). See Derrida, “Autoimmunity.”

mark of the oil-stain, re-turning the seemingly acritical landscape of the desert into a critical and contestatory space. Richard, for her part, underlines the invisible yet powerfully-symbolic discourse behind the iceberg's material transparency, exposing the constitutive ideological alphabet it so ardently wished to conceal. The operation by which the iceberg becomes textualized is in fact congruent with Richard's general project as described in the Introduction to *Residuos y metáforas*; simply put, her project calls for a "return to the text," despite the criticisms that such a gesture may incite from contemporary thinking. She explains in more detail:

While the abuses of academic-literary deconstruction made it necessary, in a certain moment, to de-fetichize the Text, which had become the emblem for a stubborn textualization that had seemingly erased from its grid the conflicts presented by the social sphere, I believe it is today equally necessary to return to the text (though not self-referentially) in order to defend critical textuality against both the reductive operation of the paper industry and the academic bureaucratization of a knowledge at the service of mere practical consumption. The technical realism of operative knowledge which dominates research in the social communication of cultural sociology reduces the possibility of expressing the value of thought's uncertainty, understood as the problematic engagement between subject, language and knowledge. This very engagement is what becomes manifested in the critical text's self-writing as it wanders on the fringes of its concept, putting into question, from its provisional nature, professional criticism's normalized knowledge. (18)

To think of the iceberg (and, by extension, of the landscape) as a text, is to envision it as an object embedded within a socio-political structure or constellation that, to a certain extent, determines its emergence and its meaning. During its brief exhibitional sojourn—and, indeed, still today, in its recorded, archival modality—the iceberg's inscription within a charged socio-political environment became all the more prominent (in truth, of course, it never existed as a detached object, even in its initial geographic remove from civilization). To be sure, the problems outlined by critics

were not inherent to the iceberg itself. (The iceberg, if I may fall into a pathetic fallacy, perhaps just wished to remain an iceberg). In reality, the critical target was not the natural object in itself, but its symbolic reconfiguration within the political context that surrounded the Universal Exposition. Within this context, the iceberg in effect became Chile's façade, the countenance by which the country denoted its democratic rebirth as well as its intent to erase the embarrassing stain of the immediate past.

Only a year after the end of Expo-Seville, in 1993, the Chilean poet Raúl Zurita carved out the phrase "ni pena ni miedo" 'neither shame nor fear' on the face of the Atacama Desert. This gesture may be viewed as an heir to Dittborn's 1981 work. At the same time, it may be contrasted with the political neutralization projected in the iceberg. What both the oil-spill and "ni pena ni miedo" share in common is the act of textualization and contextualization, the refusal to imagine the existence of a natural landscape or object untainted by the residues of history and of memory. The experience of the dictatorship, these artists and poets tell us, leaves no urban corner or natural spaces untouched. No longer to be found is a geographical haven that would be unstained, that would be divorced from recollection, that would escape a potential act of (mis)appropriation, either from those who wish to restore it to an original purity, or from those who, like Dittborn and Zurita, argue for a view of the Chilean landscape as always-already marked by the wounds of the human community. The following chapter explores the ways in which the work of Raúl Zurita deals with the concepts of death and loss and their relation to community. Contesting the redemptive reading of Zurita's work, I suggest instead that his poetry constantly undermines the general

political discourse of triumph and reconciliation—which either seek or claim to overcome loss. Zurita, I propose, offers ways to envision a community starting *from* loss, *from* non-reconciliation, and *from* a relation to the dead *as* precisely that: dead.

CHAPTER 4

Without Resurrection: Raúl Zurita and the “Failure” of Poetry

In a well-known essay appearing in *El signo y el garabato*, Octavio Paz defines the poem as a unified, self-sufficient structure that nonetheless harbors and discloses a multiplicity of meanings. According to this reading, the poem is an inherently paradoxical phenomenon: its closed, retracted form stands in contrast to its polysemous diversity. A prose work, on the other hand, is defined by Paz as a heterogeneous, diverse configuration that generally seeks to impose a singular meaning: “On the one hand, to the mobility of signs corresponds the tendency to establish a single meaning; on the other, to the plurality of meanings corresponds the rigidity of signs” (“Literatura” 65). Paz repeats the traditional notion that words in a poem constitute unique and non-interchangeable elements, the alteration of which would significantly (if not negatively) alter the coherence and self-autonomy of the poem, adding a taint to its alleged perfection. To a certain extent, prose allows for modifications, deletions, and alterations in regards to its syntax and semantic structure without such changes enacting a considerable effect on its meaning, which tends to be univocal. Contrary to prose, words in a poem, described as the *materia prima* or building blocks of its structure, are in essence immovable [*inamovibles*], giving rise and permanence to a poem erected in a frozen language [*language congelado*] which nonetheless remains miraculously animate and vibrant [*perfectamente vivo*] (65). Poetry, in short, is a paradoxical organism bursting with vitality while inhabiting a petrified, unmoving body. The rigidity of a poem’s form is directly proportionate to the flexibility of its signification. To encounter a poem thus amounts to encountering a

cold, rigid sphinx speaking in countless beautiful tongues.¹²⁶

Octavio Paz's conception of poetry is somewhat idolatrous—not meaning, of course, that Paz prostrates himself in front of poetry's golden-calf, but that poems seem to participate in a type of visibility akin to the idol's insofar as both phenomena are representative of a satiated, consummate logic of manifestation: the idol and the poem both make an intractable claim to completion. The significant difference, of course, is that in this case the idol *does* speak, and consequently does not disappoint. To call a poem an idol is to call it a firm, self-autonomous body, sated and finished, formally faultless. Still, whereas traditional idols remain mute,¹²⁷ unable to return the gaze of the observer and satisfy the prayers addressed to it, the poem as idol possesses the capacity to answer back, and to do so in a voice that contains within itself a multiplicity of answers.

What happens, however, when Paz's notion of form is literalized? That is to say, when form becomes matter, when form not only refers to the necessary (in the strongest sense of the word) semantic and syntactic arrangements and decisions executed on the page, but to the material vehicle with which the poem's words are created? When the poem is embodied through unorthodox substances like earth and

¹²⁶ Paz, who publishes *El signo y el garabato* in 1973, in a certain sense promotes the ideas espoused in North American university discourse early in the twentieth century by the New Critics—in particular, the belief in the self-autonomy and organic constitution of the poem—as well as I. A. Richard's concept of "overdetermination," which describes words as inherently polysemic (Paz: "each word hides a certain plurality of virtual meanings" [Literatura" 64]). But whereas the New Critics attempted to discredit the old dichotomy between form and content, arguing that the two cannot be separated, Paz's argument perpetuates this duality, albeit recognizing that the duality itself is malleable (Paz will thus say of prose that "it tends" to be univocal, rather than affirming that this is always the case).

¹²⁷ "The characteristic of the idol is to remain silent, and hence to let men remain silent when they no longer have anything to say—not even blasphemies" (Marion 107). The poem, it would seem, not only does not remain silent, but lets humans (readers) speak, turning the "no longer hav[ing] anything to say" in regards to the idol, to an always having something to say in regards to the poem.

vapor (unorthodox in the sense that poems are rarely accomplished with anything other than ink and paper)? When the poem deserts the book in order to inhabit the real desert, the sky? Paz's rigid separation between prose and poetry is problematized by poems embodied through unconventional mediums. Thus, while Raúl Zurita's "earth poems" grant supreme importance to form in its most basic sense—as the substance through which they are inscribed and as the material fate of this inscription—, they contradict the notion that form remains ultimately "frozen," static or immobile. In short, they challenge our viewing of the poem as an idol.

A recipient of the Premio Nacional de Literatura in 2000,¹²⁸ Raúl Zurita's proper name is quickly (if not already) becoming synonymous with the archetype of Chile's national poet. Born in Santiago in 1951, Zurita's poetry first appeared, alongside that of Juan Luis Martínez, in a limited-circulation anthology edited by Martín Micharvegas titled *Nueva poesía joven de Chile* (1972) (Galindo 194). Two years later, Zurita published a medium-length, experimental poem, "Areas Verdes," in the journal *Manuscrito*, a poem that would later be included in *Purgatorio* (1979). Around this time, Zurita also became an active member of the influential and controversial art-group CADA,¹²⁹ which purportedly attempted to blur the gap

¹²⁸ This episode stirred a heated debate among Chile's literary circles and periodicals. Some felt that Zurita was simply too young to receive the prize; others considered that the other finalist, Delia Domínguez, was more deserving of the distinction.

¹²⁹ The overarching artistic and literary movement that develops under the dictatorship is generally referred to as the "Escena de avanzada." CADA, formally founded in 1979, would represent one of the groups (perhaps the most influential one) within this larger artistic configuration. Besides Zurita, its members included visual artists Juan Castillo and Lotty Rosenfeld, sociologist Fernando Balcells, and writer Diamela Eltit. Carrying out most of their performances in urban space, the group attempted to bridge the division between the artistic and social fields while criticizing dictatorial repression and censorship. As Robert Neudstadt points out, the group drew criticism from both the left and right artistic establishments: "for the Right, CADA would have been a 'freak show,' an expression of young people needing to be taught how to respect order. Traditionalists doubted that those events organized by CADA could be described as art. Artists from the orthodox Left regarded them as elitists because of

between “art” and “life” through artistic interventions on urban and natural spaces. Zurita would continue to write poetry after the group’s dissolution, publishing actively until the present day. His work belongs to a vein of neo avant-garde poetry that arose in Chile during and after the 1973 military coup, and which included the aforementioned Juan Luis Martínez, as well Diego Maquieira and Gonzalo Muñoz, to mention two prominent examples.

Since its eruption in the 1970s, the work of Raúl Zurita has inscribed itself in cultural debates revolving around the difficult questions of political violence, social trauma, and memory. From *Purgatorio* to *INRI* (2004), Zurita has not ceased to struggle with the issue of speaking about those things which render discourse inoperative: how to witness and represent political and social violence; how to relate with the victims of the dictatorship (both those who survived and those who succumbed to its brutality); how to configure a community that is scarred and fragile yet at the same time able to move forward. Poetry, in Zurita’s work, enters a terrain—the desert—that emasculates its authority (metaphorically in the poems of *Purgatorio*, and literally in the inscription on the Atacama Desert, to which I will come back later). In its search to find the “appropriate” words, Zurita’s poetry will evoke a series of topics and themes that include redemption, reconciliation, guilt, resurrection, community, monumentality, and ruination. It is no exaggeration to say that Zurita is

their employment of new forms of technology like video and television. Others lamented the participation of poor people in some of their works. (Prólogo 13). The group’s first artistic action, “Para no morir de hambre en el arte,” was carried out in 1979, while the last, “Viuda,” took place in 1985; by this time, however, Zurita had already left the group (Neudstadt, Prólogo 37). See also Richard, ed., *Arte en Chile desde 1973*. For a survey of CADA’s interventions, photographs, interviews, as well as facsimiles of relevant documents, see Neudstadt, ed. For an analysis of CADA’s recuperation and reimplementation of avant-garde techniques within the context of Chile’s dictatorial regime see Richard, *The Insubordination* 23-37.

both admired and detested in Chile, saluted as the heir of a strong poetic tradition (whose last representative would be Neruda) or vilified as a narcissistic impostor who exploits both the national landscape and the recent historical trauma for the purposes of enriching his personal image. His detractors criticize not only what they perceived as the unnecessary and egotistic intrusion of the author's persona in his work—the constant references to Zurita's proper name in many of his poems—but, most importantly, what they interpret as a messianic and facile celebration of triumph and reconciliation in the nation's transition toward democratic governance. For these critics, Zurita's monumental ego would thus be reflected in the monumental pretensions of his work.

While it is true that a certain monumentality runs throughout Zurita's work, such monumentality, I would argue, finds itself constantly and astutely destabilized by the seeds of ruination, by a subtle yet intense reservation in regards to the attainment of redemption and closure. This explains, quite simply, why Zurita writes an *Anteparaíso* and not a *Paraíso*.¹³⁰ What we witness—and this is what I hope to show in the bulk of this chapter—is the rejection of a triumphant position that would characterize poetic practice as monumental, redemptive, and commemorative; the rejection of a position that regards the poem as itself permanent and thus as able to

¹³⁰ In refusing to traverse into “paradise”—a utopian space that would efface all difference, memory, and trauma—, Zurita dwells in what Richard Klein terms the “penultimate moment,” the moment before closure, which, depending on the poet in question, can signify either catastrophe or triumph. According to Klein, certain poems (in his example, Mallarmé's “Le Démon de l'analogie”) hasten “too quickly to the penultimate moment,” not in order to experience the end more quickly, but in order to “reduce and repair in anticipation the trauma of the anticipated certainty, blackout in the end” (105). By deferring entrance into paradise, Zurita effectively enacts the movement “from love to desire, from instantaneous identification with the other to a restrained, that is mediated relation to the other whereby its possession may be infinitely postponed” (109). To reject what I will refer to as the Other's resurrection (Zurita's gesture) is to postpone his/her possession, enduring instead relation mediated through death and *as* death.

grant permanence to both its object (the community) and its subject (the poet). Poetry, instead, metaphorically flees to the desolate spaces of the desert and of the sky and adopts what the poet perceives as their most salient features: fragility, openness, trembling. This movement, this escape, defines Zurita's entire work and culminates in the difficult execution and anguished dissipation of his earth poems. The purpose of this chapter is to first explain the treatment of the above-mentioned concepts in conjunction with the geographical spaces with which they become inseparable: to repeat, the sky and the desert. I will then move on to explore how the fragility constitutive of Zurita's earth poems relates to his overarching anti-resurrectional vision of community.

Before doing this, it would be helpful to glance over at some of the criticisms issued at Zurita's purported redemptory drive; this gesture will allow me to situate my own reading within the opposite standpoint, which argues that redemption, while constituting a continuously sought-after event, remains nonetheless permanently postponed in Zurita's work. For this purpose, I would like to focus on a text by Carlos Pérez Villalobos—published in the influential *Revista de Crítica Cultural*—which conveniently brings together the most prominent criticisms into one place. In his review of Zurita's *La vida nueva* (1994),¹³¹ Pérez Villalobos succinctly and forcefully exposes the purported “redemption,” “reconciliation,” “teleology,” and “autopromotion” manifest in Zurita's poetry. Glossing over Zurita's trajectory, Pérez Villalobos finds these traits already present in *Purgatorio*, which, despite its “inorganic character,” pretended to “link body and word, art and biography” (55). In

¹³¹ *La vida nueva* includes a photograph of the earth poem “ni pena ni miedo” in both its inner front-cover and back front-cover.

this book, Zurita, in Pérez Villalobos's reading, ultimately attempted to become an "emissary goat who expiated the guilt and pain of the social body." In his following book, *Anteparáiso*, "the voice of a poet who is in possession of his word and cleverly administers its effects becomes visible." Pérez Villalobos reads the photographs of the sky poem "La Vida Nueva," which are interspersed throughout *Anteparáiso*, as something of a publicity stunt that naively advocated "redemption through love." "This book," Pérez Villalobos goes on, "made evident what the experimental character of *Purgatorio* left ambiguous: that is, the installation of a poetic discourse that recuperated in a complex way various consecrated references (for example, the Heideggerian conception of poetry as the foundational word of the *locus*—homeland—and destiny of a people). The poet turned the Chilean landscape into the metaphor of a body wounded yet on its way towards redemption through love" (55-56). The surprising claim is then made that *Anteparáiso* remains ignorant of "its social and discursive mediations." History is absent. Better put, "the only history in *Anteparáiso* is that of the itinerary of a fallen life that is on its way to the promised land . . . Every allusion to the country's contingent political history within the book remained inscribed in that eschatological frame and in that mystical-theological interpretation" (56). Pérez Villalobos rightly signals Neruda's influence; yet while I would argue that Zurita is in dialogue with yet does not necessarily follow in Neruda's footsteps, Pérez Villalobos claims that Zurita's work, and in particular *La Vida Nueva*, "wishes to be a new *Canto general*, the general song of the new times" (57). What's more, Zurita would attempt to "exceed" [*superar*] the *Canto general*, to do better than his adopted precursor; learning from Neruda's mistakes, Zurita's project would be

successfully totalizing and redemptory. Aligning himself with the politics of reconciliation, Zurita's Christian-inspired poetic trajectory of "fall, hope, and redemption," would finally replicate the hegemonic and cheerful political narrative of "dictatorship, transition, and democratic reconciliation" (57).

Scott Weintraub provides the opposite reading. As it should be evident by now, my own interpretation aligns itself with his. Thus, I agree with his claim that Zurita "emphasizes and at the same time calls into question the forward-looking and teleological thread that runs through the course of his poetic project" (213). As Pérez Villalobos rightly points out, Zurita's gaze is constantly turned toward Paradise. Yet as Weintraub specifies, its textual presentation is deployed in such a way that Paradise's arrival is constantly deferred. In this way, "*Anteparadise*'s resistance to the possibility of an empirically futural Paradise ends up reconfiguring the temporality of Paradise as a construct more ethically 'worthy of its name'—more ethical, that is, than any project for the actual achievement of the collective 'perpetual peace' to which Zurita ostensibly refers" (214-15). Weintraub sees the enactment of this deferral in Zurita's use of "as if" clauses, which establish a "ghostly relationship to teleology" (220), as well as in his constant use of the conditional tense (220, 232).¹³² Reading

¹³² Some references (which abound throughout the text) to Utopia or redemption that are overdetermined by either the conditional or "as if" clauses include: "Y entonces como si jamás hubieran sido como si jamás se / hubieran quedado como si los mismos cielos las llamaran / todos pudieron ver al azul del océano tras la cordillera / tumultuoso americano por estas praderas marchando" 'And then as if they had never been as if they had / never remained as if the skies themselves had summoned / them all could see the ocean blue tumultuous / American behind the cordillera marching through / these meadows' (*Anteparadise* 58); "Porque la playa nunca se espejearía en sus ojos sino mejor en el / derramarse de todas las utopías. . ." 'For the beach could never be better mirrored in his eyes than / in the spilling of all the utopias . . .' (26); "Esplendurosos como levantados desde su dolor / como si se borrarán sus heridas" 'Splendrous as if risen from their pain / their wounds had been washed away' (142); "Y en que borrachos de alegría ni yo ni Usted podríamos decir / si se nos había ido el alma entre esos muertos desde donde / emergiendo todo Chile palpó las Utopías como si ellas mismas fueran las playas de nuestra vida transfiguradas albísimas / encumbrándonos la patria en la elevada dichosa de este

Anteparaiso through the Kantian idea that justice and morality must not arrive, and through the Derridian notions of a justice-to-come and of a messianism without messianicity,¹³³ Weintraub concludes that Zurita's book "necessarily wavers in its announcement of empirically futural salvation, and is actually more cautious in its depiction of the possibility and feasibility of justice than initial readings might suggest" (235).

This temporal dislocation or untimeliness that Weintraub locates in *Anteparaiso* can also be perceived in, for example, *Los poemas muertos* (2006), a recent prose text that meditates on the function of poetry in the contemporary world. In this text, Zurita imagines a community of poets walking on a beach, each of whom carries a strange and cumbersome weight on his/her back; this weight or "despojo" represents their poetic corpus, their "poemas muertos":

A thousand silhouettes struggling as they advance on the beach: one of them is a black Homer from a tiny island of the Caribbean, another is a young man from Tabasco, next to whom is a Peruvian who lives in Arequipa; the oldest one is Parra; others come from Ireland and from Africa, still others from mountainous and bloody regions, from Albania, singing sagas about blind warriors who ride blind horses and who corner and attack with their lances a dead king who cries because he cannot get out of his tomb to fight them; another one of them is me, and we walk in silence leaving there our own remains and bumping into those going back, returning and looking for their new remains. (14)

The purpose of this monotonous labor is unclear, but the text suggests that the poets carry it out for the sake of a future, for a coming community that may or may not

vuelo" 'And in which reeling with joy neither you nor I could / tell if our souls had gone off among the dead whence all / Chile emerged groping for the Utopias as if they themselves / were the beaches transfigured pure White of our / lives exalting our country in the lofty joy of this / flight' (30).

¹³³ Weintraub takes these ideas primarily from Kant's "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" and "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," and from Derrida's *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason and Specters of Marx*.

encounter and recover these fragments left on the shore. If the present represents a time of utter desolation for these poets,¹³⁴ this text envisions the (uncertain) promise of a future time wherein a community may be established. Zurita refers to this promise as the promise of “another beach,” “another shore” (15). Importantly, however, Zurita always emphasizes the precarious, uncertain nature of its coming: this other beach, this other community *may or may not come*, and this insecurity in regards to its arrival, to its eventual presence, is constitutive of its mode of being and is what sustains the call of poetry in the present. Poetry relates to this

other shore which again may be there or may not be there, and on which other beings, just as vague and improbable, see sketched on the sky the faces that survived only through the love of our memory. To those others who may exist or may not exist, on the opposite shore of a sea that may exist or not exist, who will respond or not respond, who will rehearse the funeral rites of the dead poems or will not rehearse them, who we may also call the Reader. (15)

In relating to this presence, whose arrival is always uncertain, poetry emerges as “the most fragile art” (14). While envisioning the arrival of this possible “Reader,” of this possible community that may or may not choose to pick up the dead weight of these poems, Zurita simultaneously questions it by framing its coming in a radically precarious discourse: “those dead words may cross or may not cross” (9); “carrying the weight of their dead poems in order to leave them on a beach that may be there or may not be there, on the shores of a sea that may be there or may not be there” (13); “Thus will emerge or not emerge out of the beach of another Purgatory the new beings who will proclaim or not proclaim the rebirth of dead poetry” (17); “That possible or impossible beach is what I referred to” (16).

¹³⁴ “Ese es el radical exilio de la poesía y el silencio que rodea en nuestra época a los grandes poemas” (*Los poemas* 14).

Weintraub also looks at the way in which *Anteparaíso* contests the notion of resurrecting the dead. Resurrection, in this text, proves impossible because the speaker is unable to find a just person among the dead, not to mention the living.

Weintraub sees a particular poem, “Las playas de Chile V,” as suggesting the presence of a “just one” [*un justo*]; yet the possibility of his/her arrival is simultaneously put into question by, once again, framing it in the conditional:

- IV. Pero sus heridas podrían ser el justo de las playas de Chile
- V. Nosotros seríamos entonces la playa que les alzó un justo desde sus heridas
- VI. Sólo allí todos los habitantes de Chile se habrían hecho uno hasta ser ellos el justo
que golpearon tumefactos esperándose en la playa

- IV. But the wounds could be the just person
of the beaches of Chile
- V. We would then be the beach that raised them
a just person from those wounds
- VI. There alone all Chile’s inhabitants would have
coupled until they became the just person they
beat swollen awaited on the shore (qtd in Weintraub 220; *Anteparadise* 14)

Zurita’s impossibility to locate a “just one” can be contrasted with Neruda’s belief in the necessity and possibility of doing so. While Neruda’s clear-cut division between oppressor and oppressed allows him to locate and exult an innocent, and therefore just, part (the part of those who suffered radical domination), Zurita, regarding guilt as uniformly distributed, is unable to separate the “pure” wheat from the “corrupt” chaff, barring the possibility of singling out, and therefore resurrecting, a just, innocent subject.

Zurita understands resurrection as non-evental. Just as there is no singular, locatable, just person, resurrection cannot be conceived of as a singular, eruptive

moment. If it signifies anything at all, resurrection refers quite simply to the rather mundane yet miraculous act of taking the Other into account, whether this Other is dead or alive. Zurita does not offer a program or recipe for approaching the Other; he merely states that this relation would unfold under the sign of love. Thus, in the same verses that Pérez Villalobos disapprovingly quotes, Zurita's speaker states that "No hay más resurrección / que la de los que perviven por el amor en nuestra memoria y / en los templos a cielo abierto, en las playas, en las cordilleras y en los pastizales" 'There is no other resurrection / than that of surviving by virtue of love in one's memory / and on the outdoor temples, the beaches, the mountains and grasslands' (qtd. in Pérez Villalobos 58). With respect to the dead, Zurita affirms that "Each one of us is the resurrection of the dead, and this miracle occurs with each second of our lives" ("Dos anotaciones" 13). If Christian dogma tells that resurrection "is something that will happen at the end of times" in the form of a positive catastrophe, Zurita, more urgently, believes that "each instant is the end of times"; therefore, "the dead resuscitate with each instant and speak again through us" (13).¹³⁵

From Work to Promise, or from Monument to Ruin

"Ni pena ni miedo" (1982) and "La Vida Nueva" (1993)¹³⁶ name Zurita's earth

¹³⁵ One should note the contrast between Zurita's "[the dead] speak again through us" ["vuelven a hablar en nosotros"] and Neruda's "I come to speak through/on behalf of your dead mouth" ["yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta"] (*Canto* 141).

¹³⁶ "La Vida Nueva" technically constitutes a work of "skywriting." It was carried out in June 1982 in New York City, and is comprised of fifteen short verses, each of which begins with the words "MI DIOS ES [. . .]." 'MY GOD IS [. . .].' Color photographs of each verse are interspersed—in groups of three—throughout *Anteparaíso*. The other earth poem, "Ni pena ni miedo," was carved out with bulldozers on the surface of the Atacama Desert in 1993. An aerial, black-and-white photograph of this poem is included on the front- and back-inner-covers of the 1994 edition of *La Vida Nueva*, the only edition published as of yet.

poems. One may begin by saying that these poems, through their material constitution—which any reading should take into account—complicate the relation between thing and name, form and content. “Ni pena ni miedo” ‘Neither shame nor fear’ for example, is at once the title of a poem and the poem written on the landscape. We seem to witness, in this work, the reality of a proper name, one in which the difference between name and named would seem to have dissolved. The title of the poem (“ni pena ni miedo”) and the poem itself (“ni pena ni miedo”) coincide on the desert landscape, bridging the chasm of their original distance. For once, it would seem, a name suffices; difference is extinguished and identity is accomplished. This erasure would be replicated or actualized in the physical extinction of the “text”: the daily, subtle, yet violent movement of the wind eroding and transforming the desert’s surface, which will eventually erase any possible legibility or encounter. In this way, the poem seems to remind us that as soon as there is coincidence (between name and thing), there is also destruction. The material fate of this poem warns against the fantasy of achieving identity: by acting out its own sacrifice, “ni pena ni miedo” suggests that a name can only coincide or be “faithful” to its object in death.

In his introductory remarks to *Anteparaiso*, Zurita obliquely, and by reference to Dante’s “project,” tackles the issue of coincidence, that is, the extent to which a poem should adequately represent its object, the extent to which the word should correspond or be faithful to its thing:

Dante, on the last page of *La Vita Nuova*, promises to write a poem in which he hopes to write about his beloved what has never been written about any other woman. Many years later he finished the *Divine Comedy*, but to accomplish that, his beloved had to die. Well, from all those open spaces to the south of the Río Bravo, I have tried to imagine the trip in reverse, to pass

not from the promise to the work, not from the New Life to the Comedy, but from the Comedy to life—opening from within ourselves like a flower, from the work to the promise, from the Old to the New World: to the shores of this land that loves us. I would like our New Life to end with these words. Except that I do not want my love to die. (*Anteparaiso* 24-25)¹³⁷

Dante—in Zurita’s reading—promises, writes, and eventually achieves the work. But the condition of possibility for the work’s successful production, the final consequence of his undertaking, is the dead of his beloved. Put more simply, we may say—with Zurita—that Dante moves from the living promise to the dead monument. Dante’s word is not only adequate or faithful to its object: it is able to say of it what was never said before. The success of the work imposes closure, renders the movement toward the promise futile, indeed impossible. That Zurita undertakes the opposite journey can be witnessed in the phenomenality of his earth poems, which materially begin as monuments but end up as “ruins,” which move, in other words, from the everlasting work to the open promise. Basing my reading on Zurita’s remarks, I view his earth poems not as the fatal coincidence between word and thing, poetry and its object, but as the perpetual disjunction between the two, as the deferral of the work’s accomplishment.

How, then, should we categorize these works when their very constitution entails erasure and thereby hinders archivization? Poems, interventions, photographs, earth art, land art, sky-, desert-writing? It would seem as though Zurita himself would renounce the term “work” and instead refer to them as “promises.” Dwelling in their distant places and unique temporalities, these poems elude the laws of appellation, appropriation, and fixity. Bearing in mind their generic ambiguity, I will refer to

¹³⁷ Schmitt’s English translation, which I here cite, offers no pagination to Zurita’s Preface. The page numbers I offer refer to the Spanish-language edition.

them—as I have done already—as “poems.” In my reading, I will also try to bear in mind their material character, and this because Zurita’s poetry, to my mind, is particularly reluctant to disassociate abstraction from materiality: instead, the poetics of memory that it puts into practice depends on the perpetual association of the two. The materiality of the earth poems—which play with the concepts of permanence and disappearance—is essential to comprehending one of the principal concerns of Zurita’s work: memory; in particular, the memory associated with the dictatorship and its effects during and beyond the country’s transition to democracy.

“Ni pena ni miedo” and “La Vida Nueva” embody evanescence, withdrawal and departure. As such, they stand in contrast to a monumental conception of the artwork and of the memory-work. They are both, of course, in a certain sense monumental: their sheer size, as well as the technical and logistic difficulties of their execution, attests to this fact. This monumentality, however, finds itself undermined at the moment of inscription, at the very instant in which the letter is carved onto the resistant face of the desert or sketched on the vacant surface of the sky. The vapor that produces the short verses that comprise “La Vida Nueva” fades away at the moment of inscription, while the letters that on the Atacama desert make-up the single verse “ni pena ni miedo” dissolve with the effects of erosion. In both cases, and through its passive subjection to the surrounding natural forces, the body of the poem emerges as a transient, fragile entity. In letting itself be subjected to this violence, form eschews physical presence. The poem’s architecture is exposed to ruination. Within the economy of this erasure, the earth may be said to perform a violence that is nonetheless creative: it precludes these works from attaining the solidity of the

monument, thereby allowing them, in Zurita's words, to move on to the realm of promise.

"La Vida Nueva" may be described as the frailest poem: its words survived for an instant, effaced by the wind as soon as they were made legible. Lifting one's gaze toward the sky, one would have witnessed the poignant transit from readability to incomprehension, from signification to emptiness, from art to nature. What survives of the event is nothing save its endless repetition in the memory of those few who witnessed it and in the photographs which captured the poem:

MI DIOS ES HAMBRE	MI DIOS ES NIEVE
MI DIOS ES NO	MI DIOS ES DESENGAÑO
MI DIOS ES CARRONA	MI DIOS ES PARAISO
MI DIOS ES PAMPA	MI DIOS ES CHICANO
MI DIOS ES CANCER	MI DIOS ES VACIO
MI DIOS ES HERIDA	MI DIOS ES GHETTO
MI DIOS ES DOLOR	MI DIOS ES
MI AMOR DE DIOS	
MY GOD IS HUNGER	MY GOD IS SNOW
MY GOD IS NO	MY GOD IS DISILLUSIONMENT
MY GOD IS CARRION	MY GOD IS PARADISE
MY GOD IS PAMPA	MY GOD IS CHICANO
MY GOD IS CANCER	MY GOD IS EMPTINESS
MY GOD IS WOUND	MY GOD IS GHETTO
MY GOD IS PAIN	MY GOD IS
MY LOVE OF GOD	(<i>Anteparadise 1</i>)

This poem does not so much indicate the abandonment of human companionship—the disappearance of friends, lovers, relatives or strangers—as it highlights the abandonment of God. Sky-writing reenacts God's abandonment. The poem is structured as a series of verses that intend to predicate or describe God. They share the same form and begin with the same words: "MI DIOS ES . . ." God becomes multiple, heterogeneous, at once "hunger" and "snow," "wound" and "cancer." Yet God is something else: he is smoke, air, and sky. He is retreat and evaporation:

departure. Zurita fills the sky with a God whose presence begins to withdraw at the very moment of his arrival. Insofar as the language in which God is named, defined and predicated, is a language that vanishes, the poem names God as that very disappearance, that very withdrawal into the blankness of the sky. Indeed, it not only says disappearance: it shows it, enacts it. The ephemeral medium through which the presence of God is made manifest signals the impossibility of maintaining presence, perhaps even the refusal of God himself to concede to presence, his refusal to becoming a fixed image, a monument. In his repudiation of figuration, “my God” is also iconoclasm. And in his immediate withdrawal, “my God” is also abandonment. In this way, “La Vida Nueva” acts in much the same way as icons do: referencing God’s departure, and doing so through the material with which inscription is simultaneously accomplished and erased.

An icon should not pretend to reference God directly. Made in his image, but without corresponding to it, an icon “will no longer be expressive, signifying, or referential” (Mondzain 81). There is a constitutive absence within the heart of the icon: the absence of God himself, who is never present as such in the image. Withdrawing, the image lets our gaze pass towards the divine. In this way, the icon may be described as *passage*. It both shows and hides the divine, and in this way constitutes an *enigma* (a *mystery*, on the other hand, allows no access, being absolutely impenetrable): it renders the invisible visible *as* invisible (88). Jean-Luc Marion distinguishes between the icon and the idol through their modes of signaling. Thus, the idol “fascinates and captivates the gaze” (10); it exhausts the gaze while at the same time being exhausted by it. When the gaze rests upon the idol, it finds itself

mesmerized by its splendor and brilliance, becomes arrested, lets itself be filled by its sumptuous visibility. It is a relation characterized by stagnation. Marion describes this immobilized gaze as “coagulated blood,” as an object that has found, in the idol, its “earth”—an earth on which it not only rests, but in which it is buried (13). The idol allows for no beyond, wanting itself to be the beyond; it erects itself as a temple in which God becomes delimited, measurable. The idol, in short, is the space in which humans can bear the sight of God since God is measured in the human being’s image.

“La Vida Nueva” avoids solidifying itself into an idol, and does so through its material composition. The poem is unable to provide the gaze its “earth”—and thus to bury the gaze under its obscurity. On the contrary, the ephemeral nature of smoke refuses to fix and to measure God. Iconic rather than idolatrous, the beyond that it admits is the sky to which it gives way and in which the gaze loses itself. Before being captivated by the idol, the gaze sees nothing in particular, opening onto what Marion calls the *invisible* (13-14). The icon, while embodying an image given to the gaze, nonetheless allows for an opening toward the *invisible*: “The icon . . . attempts to render visible the invisible as such, hence to allow that the visible not cease to refer to an other than itself, without, however, that other ever being reproduced in the visible” (18). The gaze surpasses the icon, despite the fact that the icon comprises a solid object. “La Vida Nueva” reproduces this gesture by which the icon withdraws, reproducing it in a literal, non-figurative way. The gaze cannot fix itself upon anything for the reason that the letters on the sky vanish.

“Ni pena ni miedo” may be described, on the other hand, as the most resilient poem. But again, deceitfully so. Subjected to a constant process of destruction, the

only longevity which it can aspire to is the “longevity of the ruin or the rune” (Franco 223). Like the inscription on the sky, which having taken place only once attests to the singularity of its event, projecting itself toward the future through its photographic iterability, the writing of the desert has been recorded as a photograph and is given to us as such. With this “geological” poem, which may be described as a giant epitaph, Zurita situates himself within a genealogy of epitaphic writing harking back, in the Western tradition, to the ancient Greek poets, most notably Simonides. Anne Carson has done a beautiful analysis of Simonides’ epitaphs, reading him in contrast to a poet of our last century: Paul Celan.

Carson points out that Simonides is the first poet in the West to have accepted fees—both from private individuals and from public institutions—in exchange for his poetic services. With Simonides, poetry leaves the system of the gift to begin participating in a market economy, where poetry becomes a commodity. Beyond the act of receiving money in exchange for his compositions, Simonides establishes a contract with the dead by dedicating himself to the writing of epitaphs, from which he made a decent amount of money (16). The responsibility that the poet has with the dead is simple: “to carry the transaction forward, from those who can no longer speak to those who may yet read (and must yet die)” (75). Epitaphs allow the dead to not die entirely, to postpone their total annihilation, their vanishing into nothingness, “creat[ing] a space of exchange between present and past by gaining a purchase on memory” (85). Simonides must not fail to fulfill his part of the contract: to ensure that his epitaphs withstand the course of time and thus preserve the memory of the one(s) for whom the epitaph was commissioned. Ultimately, and despite the enormity of

such a task, Simonides remains fairly assured in the strength of the epitaphic genre: “He seems confident in the power of ‘virtue’ to pull open the door at this end and reverse the natural direction of mortal traffic. Such confidence is a typical feature of the epitaphic rhetoric of his numerous public monuments” (87). This confidence is embodied by the material medium that supports the epitaph: stone.

In contrast to Simonides, Paul Celan lacked confidence in the redemptive quality of poetry. His struggle against German culture and its language is well-known (he once famously said that “Death is a master from Germany”). To the permanence and durability of stone and sand, Celan interposes the transience and evaporation of snow. In one of his poems, he calls for “No more sand art, no sand book, no master.” He thus “repudiate[s] a kind of art and a state of himself that no longer suffice[s]; a stage in which he had sought to ‘poeticize’ reality (as he says) rather than simply to ‘name’ it” (115). The poem to which Carson refers poignantly stages its own evaporation. It ends with a neologism: “Deepinsnow,” which is reduced to “Eeepinow,” and which finally becomes a mere string of vowels: “E – i – o.” Carson interprets this linguistic “melting” as evocative of a more concrete and violent disappearance: the systematic disappearance of millions of Jews at the hands of the Nazis. “In his lifetime Celan saw the seed of Abraham lose possession of the gate of his enemies and exchange the innumerability of sand for a specific number that is usually put at six million. By the odd mathematics of that time the number six million came to be equal to zero” (117). Celan chooses snow over sand because, for him, the latter still holds a positive value: despite the disintegration of its form, it endures over time. Snow, on the other hand, eschews both form and durability. In Carson’s words:

“Sand art may represent the entire vast improvident and infinitely replicable burned-out linguistic store of poeticizing poetry. Snow art, on the other hand, keeps a sense of its own economy” (116).

I would argue that “ni pena ni miedo” keeps just as strong a “sense of its own economy” despite the fact that it is accomplished as “sand art,” more specifically, “desert art.” Celan, after all, chooses to compose his “snow poem” in a medium resistant to time: the printed letter. Zurita, on the other hand, decides to compose his earth and sky poems in mediums subject to time and erosion—sand and vapor—while, of course, also choosing to photograph them. In the end, both Celan and Zurita, however, may be described as unsuccessful poets, if success is here understood as poetry’s ability to be faithful to its object.

Though at first sight they may give this impression, monumentality is precisely what the earth poems avoid. At this point, it would be helpful to explore the relation between the monument and memory in order to show how memory, when taken up and immobilized by the monument, becomes an inert memorial, while through the earth poems’ fragile mode of being it becomes, paradoxically, a promise.

The monument destroys the memory of that which it seeks to preserve, destroys it by embodying its record completely, and by hailing its embodiment as adequate and indestructible. The monument therefore names that space in which memory is transformed into the *memorial*; in which transitivity becomes reflexivity, in which disappearance becomes saturated presence—a presence full of itself, satisfied and self-sufficient. Upheld by its sheer weight, the monument requires nothing of the human part to sustain itself. Self-subsisting, the monument does away with the human

gaze and with the human voice. It neither calls out to our sight nor does it incite us to speak; it gazes at itself and speaks for itself. The monument takes it upon itself—in an absolute and uncompromising manner—the task of keeping memory in the archival presence of its body. Memory, “held hostage” by the monument, becomes intact: beyond reach and touch; the human gesture can no longer approach it. The monument keeps memory unharmed while issuing an intractable prohibition that says “Do not come near. Do not touch the memory that I myself embody.” At the same time, the monument says this: “You may forget this memory. You may renounce the obligation of keeping this memory, since it now persists *in* me and *as* me.” In this sense, and insofar as it deems the human part incapable of remembering adequately, what the monument promotes is the work of forgetting. The responsibility to remember no longer falls upon us—stupefied subjects gazing at its imposing presence: the monument wholly assumes that obligation.

What I am doing here is speaking of the monument as an *idol*. The figure of the monument, in other words, may be read as the secular version of the idol. Both would have analogous ends, which are to coincide with the objects that they initially protect: while the monument, as I have described it, attempts to be itself memory, the idol attempts to be itself the divine. To better understand this visual logic, it would be helpful to turn briefly to someone who has offered extensive theorizations on this topic.

Jean-Luc Nancy has written on the relation between image and violence. Arguing that violence is constitutive of the process of imaging (of producing an image), he nonetheless distinguishes between two manifestations of violence with

respect to the image: the violence of truth and the truth of violence, the latter of which he associates with the idol. To begin, Nancy suggests that “every image borders on cruelty” (“Image” 25), not simply because Western museums “are full of images of bloodshed,” but, most importantly, because the manifestation of an image involves an essential gesture by which it tears itself out of a ground [*fond*]. In doing so, the image becomes “the distinct; as such, it distinguishes itself: it sets itself apart and at a distance, it therefore marks this separation and thus causes it to be remarked—it *becomes remarkable*, noticeable and marked as such” (“The Image” 6; author’s emphasis). In order to emerge as such, the image must detach itself from its base, frame itself by inflicting a break or wound on the uniformity of its ground. In *The Muses*, Nancy reads the first representations of human art (the inscriptions of human hands on the walls of Cosquer Cave in present-day France, for example) with a strongly Heideggerian modulation: these human-made images represented an interruption in the continuity of Being. Nancy views the birth of humanity and of representational art as this interruption, as this caesura in the homogeneity of Being.¹³⁸ In representing themselves (the figure of the hand stood here for the human figure as a whole), humans distinguished themselves from their ground; they became monstrous in the gesture of “monstrating” themselves to themselves; they became detached and estranged both to themselves and to their world at the very moment in which they “exit[ed] from pure presence” (70). The hand leaving its impression on the wall was

¹³⁸ Ian James explains that the artistic gesture is “the presentation or manifestation which is the coming-into-being of world, that is, the disclosure (or *surgissement*) of being-in-the-world itself” (217). He adds that “Nancy’s thinking about art here is inseparable from the manner in which he thinks world disclosure, or being-in-the-world, as a spacing of space, an originary unfolding of spatiality, in a temporal-spatial passage of sense” (218).

“no longer a prehensible hand” (72); by extension, the human body was no longer simply a biological body. In representing themselves, humans became their own Other. Humanity, for Nancy, began thus, “in the calmly violent silence of a gesture,” on these ancient walls where “the continuity of being was interrupted by the birth of a form,” and where humanity, for the first time, apprehended its own strangeness. “At this,” Nancy concludes, “man trembled, and this trembling was him” (74).

This is why the image “borders on cruelty,” because it performs an act of violence that allows it to come forth and become *sacred*, that is to say, become “the separate, what is set aside, removed, cut off” (“The Image” 1)—what Nancy prefers to call, to avoid any religious overtones, “the distinct.”¹³⁹ While it is true that in becoming an image a thing is able to “resemble itself, and therefore to be itself” (“Image” 24), that, in other words, an image acts as a “gathering” through which the thing imaged obtains its identity, this gathering must be accompanied by an opposite force of separation: “to assemble itself [the thing] must withdraw from its outside,” that is to say, from its *fond*. Thus, imaging both gathers and disperses, coheres and disjoins, structures and scatters.

While Nancy thinks of this inherent violence in the production of an image as a productive force, he acknowledges that oftentimes (in fascist or dictatorial regimes, for example), images become wholly subordinated to the regime of violence. While the emergence of the positive image, with its inherent “tear” or “cut,” occurs as a manifestation of a “violence of truth” (which “opens, and frees a space for the

¹³⁹ “The sacred is that which is set apart (from the everyday or the profane), separated or withdrawn—that which, in a sense cannot be touched. In order to differentiate this sense of the sacred from its entanglement in religious practices, and in order to underline the radicality of the separation and distance designated here, Nancy invokes this term *distinct*” (James 225).

manifest presentation of the true” [“Image” 18]), the image that is subordinated to violence is subordinated to “the truth of violence”—a truth that “both destroys and destroys itself.”¹⁴⁰ The question is then whether the image serves as “the mark of truth’s closing or of truth’s opening,” whether it is made to become an *idol* or an *icon*; whether it turns into an “intractable” entity, a “self-satisfied bunker,” a space where truth is “brutally encased in concrete,” or into an essential “opening of truth,” a space where the “singular irruption of truth might emerge” (“Image” 19). In this respect, the image is always at risk, particularly since one of the essential characteristics of dictatorial violence is that it “always makes an image of itself” (20), attaining its completion, authority, and power in an image that is nothing other than the manifestation of itself and of its power. Violence as image mobilizes its own exhibition, “it wants to be demonstrative and ‘monstrative,’” a “self-showing act” (21), the truth of a manifestation of which it is itself the truth: an image that admits no sign other than itself, even more, an image “in excess of signs” insofar as “it wants to be its own sign” (26).

Elsewhere, Nancy speaks of the idol in terms evocative of this violence. For ancient theologians, the idol is condemned not because it pretends to image God, nor because it fails to represent the divine adequately, but because it itself wants to be the divine, because it “asserts its presence only through itself,” rather than allowing God’s presence to manifest itself through it (“Forbidden” 30). The idol amounts to a “massive presence,” monumental and imposing: another “self-satisfied bunker.” The

¹⁴⁰ Elsewhere in this essay, Nancy describes the difference between the “violence of truth” and the “truth of violence” as the difference between a “violence without violence” and a “violating violence,” respectively (“Image” 26).

idol is characterized by being mute, blind, and immobile, “quite the opposite” of the ““real god,”” who is “only word (addressed to his people), vision (of the heart of man), and movement (in order to accompany his people)” (31). The idol encloses itself as a saturated and heavy monolith: it is pure weight. It has no openings, no orifices: neither eyes, nor ears, nor mouth. Nothing penetrates, moves or passes through it. It is stagnant, “without access and without passage.” It is structurally complete, robust, and invulnerable. Nancy points out that the Jewish tradition does not forbid *all* kinds of representation, but only those which, like the idol, announce their completion: “Talmudic commentaries will specify that if it is permissible to paint—more than to sculpt—faces (the question being limited to that which has openings. . .), once again these faces must never be complete . . . What is actually forbidden is the sculpted image of a completed face” (31). In other words, what is allowed is the *ruin*. A broken face rather than a whole one. The only permissible representation would be inherently lacking, precisely what the idol—full and satiated to the point of bursting—is not. Precariousness is not constitutive of the idol, which is in all senses of the word *complete*.

Having outlined the main characteristics of the idol, which may be seen as the religious counterpart of the monument, I would reiterate that Zurita develops a poetics that avoids becoming precisely that: a satiated and imperishable structure. A poetics, in other words, that undermines the very foundations that it erects. If Zurita’s poetry may be described as iconoclastic, its iconoclasm would not target the icon but the

idol.¹⁴¹ Yet this avoidance of monumentality characterizes not only his earth poems: it defines Zurita's entire work. Put differently, Zurita may be said to speak at all times not from the monument but from the ruin, not from certainty but from doubt. His poetry wrestles at all times with the imminence of its own failure. This failure, nonetheless, can be read as productive or enabling insofar as the failure of poetry to fully commemorate its object, to correspond to or remember it adequately, is precisely what allows the poem to keep on gesturing toward and speaking of it. The failure of the work, in this sense, entails the prolongation of the promise.

Two Voices: Confidence and Trembling

To take this "failed" yet promise-driven approach entails going in the opposite direction than Chile's most recognized and influential poet: Pablo Neruda. While both poets deal with catastrophic memory (the catastrophe of conquest, colonization, and imperialism in Neruda; the catastrophe of dictatorship in Zurita), the specific way in which each deals with memory, resurrection, and the poetic voice is radically different.

In general, Zurita distances himself from the epic and iconoclastic tone embraced by his better-known precursors: Neruda, whom I have already mentioned, and Nicanor Parra. He sees neither the "antipoesía" of Parra, nor the monumentality

¹⁴¹ Based on Marie-José Mondzain's study *Image, Icon, Economy*, we may say that the icon is not consubstantial to the divine (is not a natural image), but rather relates to it in a heterodox manner (as an artificial image) (73). The icon "aims at resemblance to its prototype without trying to maintain with it the relation of similitude that the prototype maintains with its own substance" (83). The icon *points to* but is not itself the divine. If the icon reflects the divine, "It *reflects it as an enigma*, thus becoming the index and living proof of the existence of what it 'crosses over to' (*diabainein*)" (66; author's emphasis). With respect to representations of Christ, we may simply say that the icon is in relation to Christ but does not contain Christ himself: "Christ is not in the icon; the icon is toward Christ, who never stops withdrawing" (88).

of Neruda as “adequate” models by which to symbolize the violence of the dictatorship nor by which to narrate the ideological struggles that the nation faces in its democratic transition. Both Neruda and Parra, for Zurita, write from a position of certainty and of confidence. Theirs is a poetry that claims to be sufficient, better yet, efficient in giving voice to the dispossessed (Neruda) or in discrediting the auratic prestige of poetry and undermining the poet’s privileged status (Parra). In *Poemas y antipoemas* (1954), Parra’s iconoclasm, on the one hand, efficiently destroys the idealized image that the West has construed of poetry and of the poet. In the *Canto general*, on the other hand, Neruda efficiently speaks on behalf of the countless American subjects who died as a result of the land’s colonization and oppression. It does not matter so much if poetry is constructive (Neruda) or destructive (Parra), whether it seeks to monumentalize a continent or to demolish Poetry’s ivory tower. What matters is that both poets construct a voice hardened by a confidence in poetry’s creative or destructive power. The voice that emerges from this site of confidence is a voice that does not tremble. The voice that proclaims the destruction of poetry and that which speaks on behalf of the dispossessed resist both doubt and hesitation. Parra’s discourse is destructive while remaining itself indestructible. Neruda’s discourse undoes the silence of the oppressed while it itself is unable to keep silent.

Although I do not wish to diminish the importance of Zurita’s deviation from the iconoclastic certitude of Parra’s poetry, I want to focus specifically on his rejection of Neruda’s position, particularly the one taken by the speaker in the *Canto general*. The reason being that, as I mentioned earlier, Neruda and Zurita (more explicitly than Parra) both struggle with the issue of how to speak of a violent past and of how to

relate to the memory of those who fell victim to that violence, providing radically different answers on this respect. Regarding Parra, suffice it cite some remarks that Zurita makes in his *Literatura, lenguaje, y sociedad, 1973-1983*. Here, Zurita agrees with the position that sees Chile's post-1973 literature as questioning the mastery of the literary subject: "what the literary works produced in Chile after September 1973 show," he indicates, "is thus the crisis of the autonomous subject in those works" (35). Zurita sees Parra as a precursor to this crisis; yet the crisis that Parra narrates, he adds, is not radical enough. The Parrian subject's authority derives, paradoxically, from his self-questioning; Parrian self-parody, in other words, is still a form of mastery:¹⁴²

the crisis of the subject in Parra's work is only a semi-crisis, a half-crisis; strictly speaking, there the relation between the subject and the collectivity, and between the subject and his own discourse is not altered; even when the liar's position is assumed, [this position] is possible because there is always the guarantee that words never lose their certainty: they always say what they always say they say. Our argument is that this very certainty has been put in doubt by recent literary production. (36)

With respect to Neruda, a contrast can be drawn between the self-assured voice of the *Canto general*, and the uncertain voice in Zurita's work. Though appearing early in the *Canto general*, the famous section "Alturas de Macchu Picchu" may be said to represent the culmination of Neruda's redemptive and prophetic attempt to give voice to the American dispossessed. An heir to romantic sensibility, the speaker, a solitary walker, ascends to the high place where the ancient Inca city lies in ruins. The

¹⁴² This auto-parodic mode can be seen, for example, in "Se canta al mar," where the speaker says: "Voy a explicarme aquí, si me permiten, / Con el eco mejor de mi garganta. / Por aquel tiempo yo no comprendía / Francamente ni cómo me llamaba, / No había escrito aún mi primer verso / Ni derramado mi primera lágrima; / Era mi corazón ni más ni menos / Que el olvidado kiosko de una plaza" 'I am going to explain myself, if you allow me, / With the best my throat can do. / During that time I did not even know / What my name was, / I had not yet written my first verse / Nor shed my first tear; / My heart was nothing less / Than a forgotten kiosk in a town square' (*Poemas* 41). Other examples from *Poemas y antipoemas* include the poems "Autorretrato" (55-56), "Epitafio" (67-68), and "Advertencia al lector" (71-73).

encounter with the abandoned site proves nothing short of revelatory: it is here that the speaker attains a panoramic glance of the American continent, including its violent past and its subterranean glory; it is here that the speaker is able to commune with the dead; here, finally, where he grants them the voice denied by their suppressors. Parts I-V show the prototypical Nerudian speaker of previous works, particularly that of

Residencia en la tierra: an alienated subject walking in the midst of decaying things:

Del aire al aire, como una red vacía,
iba yo entre las calles y la atmósfera, llegando y despidiendo,
en el advenimiento del otoño la moneda extendida
de las hojas, y entre la primavera y las espigas,
lo que el más grande amor, como dentro de un guante
que cae, nos entrega como una larga luna.

From air to air, like an empty mesh,
I went through streets and atmosphere, arriving and saying goodbye,
in the advent of autumn the coin issued from
the leaves, and through springtime and thorns,
that which the greatest love, as if inside a glove
that falls, bestows on us like a long moon. (*Canto* 127)

Not surprisingly, the season is autumn, and the leaves, described as coins, mimic the anemic and tortured state of the subject: just as the leaves fall to the ground, the speaker falls into a deeper state of alienation and despair. Surrounded by a decomposing world, the speaker alludes to earlier characters appearing in poems such as “Walking Around” and “No hay olvido,” who wander aimlessly through deserted streets and lament the surrounding decay. The atmosphere is one of dissonance, and existence is seen as a continuous death, a perpetual ruination. To give expression to the grief that such an atmosphere imposes, the speaker must devise an equally dissonant and discordant discourse. The decadence of the world thus finds its equivalent in what Neruda calls, in a famous manifesto, “impure poetry,” a poetry

plagued with polluted images, disturbing metaphors, and sensory excess.¹⁴³

While the subjects of *Residencia en la tierra* resign themselves to becoming mere witnesses to the surrounding destruction (perhaps attaining a perverse delight in their own decay and in the sublime lamentations that witnessing death inspires), the speaker of “Alturas” does not betray a secret pleasure vis-à-vis his condition. Rather, the subject here makes every attempt to escape his solitude. What he seeks is a communion with someone other than himself; to recover the fragments of his ruined self and reconstruct a lost identity; to arrest the incessant mobility to which he is subjected, the “comings” and “goings” that define his mundane existence; to attain a place, to make contact with the earth and with humanity; to fill the void of his restless hand with the full grip of fraternity.

Place, contact, plenitude:¹⁴⁴ the beginning of “Alturas” underlines the lacks in the subject. The “empty net” with which Part I opens alludes, first, to a well-known Mexican *icnocuícatl*—an elegiac “sad song”—in which the anonymous poet, lamenting the destruction of the ancient city of Tenochtitlan at the hands of the Spanish, says “Era nuestra herencia una red de agujeros” ‘Our inheritance was a net with holes.’¹⁴⁵ Beyond this specific allusion, the image signifies the inability to gather

¹⁴³ Neruda defines impure poetry [*poesía sin pureza*] as follows: “Let the poetry we search for be like this: worn out as if by acid by manual labor, heavy with sweat and smoke, smelling of urine and of lilies, splashed by professions within and outside of the law . . . A poetry impure like a suit, like a body, with nutrition stains, shameful attitudes, with wrinkles, observations, dreams, vigils, prophecies, declarations, doubts, affirmations, taxes” (“Sobre una poesía” 244).

¹⁴⁴ The encounter with plenitude places Neruda in a poetic tradition that includes Octavio Paz and Jorge Guillén, all of whom share a desire to attain wholeness. Paz does this, for example, through the erotic encounter, while Guillén attains it through an encounter with everyday existence—what José Angel Valente calls “the exceptional view of normality” (“*Cántico*” 110). This tradition will often adopt the “highest” hour of the day, noon, to symbolize the point of this encounter.

¹⁴⁵ The complete stanza reads: “Golpeábamos, en tanto, los muros de adobe, / y era nuestra herencia una red de agujeros. / Con los escudos fue su resguardo, pero / ni con con escudos puede ser sostenida su soledad” ‘Meanwhile, we struck the adobe walls, / and our inheritance was a net with holes. / They

up the subject's fragmented pieces, to arrest the instability that threaten to and in effect thwart his constitution; in short, the "empty net" represents the impossibility of attaining presence. Similarly, the hermetic image of the "glove that falls" signals at once the impossibility to attain immediacy (with both the Other and the world) and the future possibility of doing so. While the glove itself signals the frustrating, cultural mediation of contact, the fact that it is falling, cast-off, signals an eventual conciliation, an unmediated touch. The speaker's task may be described as the shedding of that glove and as the eventual the plunging of his hand into what he will call the "genital" depths of the earth. In the meantime, the speaker feels utterly frustrated, inasmuch as he can only grasp repulsive things: "No pude asir sino un racimo de rostros o de máscaras / precipitadas, como anillos de oro vacío, / como ropas dispersas hijas de un otoño rabioso / que hiciera temblar el miserable árbol de las razas asustadas" 'I could not grasp but a cluster of faces or masks / sinking like rings of hollow gold, / strewn garments—children of a rabid autumn / that would shake the miserable tree of the frightened races' (129). His hand is unable to find a place on which to rest, a motion that would reciprocate his touch: "No tuve sitio donde descansar la mano / y que, corriente como agua de manantial encadenado, / o firme como grumo de antracita, o cristal, / hubiera devuelto el calor o el frío de mi mano extendida" 'There was no place on which to rest my hand, / no place on which, ephemeral like water from a captive stream / or rigid like a lump of anthracite or crystal, / would have reciprocated the warmth or coldness of my hand reaching out' (129). The speaker's un-reciprocated touch is symptomatic of his overall

sought refuge behind their shields, but / not even their shields could withstand their solitude' (León-Portilla 166).

estrangement. Self-alienation culminates in the speaker's fleeing to the ends of civilization. Having crossed every street, river and city, he reaches a deserted house, "sin lámpara, sin fuego, / sin pan, sin piedra, sin silencio, solo" 'with no lamp, no fire, / no bread, no stone, no silence, alone' (131). There, in utter solitude, cut off from every trace of community, the speaker narrates his death as the most humiliating of events: the speaker, that is, dies not for a cause or ideal, not on behalf of an Other; he dies, instead, of his own death, a bourgeois death, "muriendo de mi propia muerte" 'dying of my own death' (131).

Beginning with section VI, the speaker experiences a radical change that improves and eventually cancels his alienation. This change is signaled by a physical ascent: "Entonces en la escala de la piedra he subido / entre la atroz maraña de las selvas perdidas / hasta ti, Macchu Picchu" 'Then, through the world's stairway I ascended, / through the atrocious thicket of lost rainforests / up to you, Macchu Picchu' (131). In reaching the Incan ruins, the speaker exclaims "Esta fue la morada, este es el sitio" 'This was the sanctuary, this is the site.'¹⁴⁶ He adopts a quintessentially romantic pose: atop the hill on which the ancient city rests, he is granted, at last, the spectacle of the American continent and the prophetic function that will redeem him. From here on, alienation and fragmentation vanish, for at last the poet has found union with the landscape, community with the marginalized, communion with the buried past. He appeals to the continent to mimic his ascent,

¹⁴⁶ Neruda's phrase, of course, reproduces the well-known baroque topos of "desengaño," a commonplace in poets such as Francisco de Quevedo and Francisco de Rioja. *Hic Roma perit*: a baroque speaker would have uttered a statement like this one as he chanced upon some solemn ruins, which in turn testified to the empire's extinguished power. This gesture, and its accompanying phrase, are uttered by Neruda's speaker as he discovers the Incan citadel ("Esta es la morada, este es el sitio). The very charged word *esta* (*hic*), which appears in Neruda's verse, also alludes to poetic *deixis*, a subject too complex to adequately treat here. For a discussion of *deixis* in poetry see Culler 164-70.

“Sube conmigo, amor americano” ‘Rise up with me, American love’ (134), and calls out to the slaves and workers that built the city to take his hand and reciprocate his touch: “Dame la mano desde la profunda / zona de tu dolor diseminado” ‘Give me your hand from the depths / of your disseminated pain’ (140). It is at this moment that the speaker’s hand finally finds a place on which to rest, a presence to touch and grasp: his hand no longer trembles. The same can be said in regards to his voice. As the speaker’s confidence builds, his voice becomes more forceful, more demanding (“yo te interrogo, sal de los caminos” ‘I question you, salt of the roads’ [138]); this confidence culminates in the desire to give full expression to the voices muted by official history: “Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta,” “Hablad por mis palabras y mi sangre” ‘I come to speak through/on behalf of your dead mouth,’ ‘Speak through my words and my blood’ (141).

In an interview, Zurita—not surprisingly—names Neruda as one of his precursors, singling out “Alturas de Macchu Picchu” as the “greatest poem every written in the Spanish language.” Nonetheless, he says that he is unable to identify with Neruda’s jubilant tone:

Yet in regards to my sensibility, I feel very distant. Neruda always spoke with a sense of confidence in history, in a future to be conquered. Whereas I, due to the times in which I’ve had to live, feel to have always spoken from precariousness, from uncertainty, from insecurity. In places like these I have seen genuine representations of what it means to be alive after everything and against everything; my poetry stems from the will to not die, to not succumb. (“En el ojo”)

Zurita avoids the self-assurance that we find in Neruda. While both poets are adamant to speak about the present’s relationship with its violent past (ancient or recent), Zurita’s voice issues at all times from a locus of uncertainty; it is pregnant with doubt.

Poetry here is aware of the futility of its summoning, of the impossibility that its call will be reciprocated by the sudden or miraculous appearance of a full, jubilant presence. Poetry, we might say, issues a “Come”. Yet it knows in advance that that its call is inadequate, that it will not bring forth a body; that Lazarus, to allude to the well-known biblical episode, will stay in his tomb. It is for this very reason, however, that the passion of its call is all the more intense, the poignancy of its “Come” all the more resonant. Maurice Blanchot has written about this passion, which heightens as the object recedes: “The more distant or difficult the object of hope is, the more profound and close to its destiny as hope is the hope that affirms it: I hope little when what I hope for is almost at hand” (*The Infinite* 41). Conversely, the passion ascribed to hope grows stronger as the object of hope grows distant. Insofar as it is alone, as it speaks from aloneness, poetry maintains the hope of companionship while it enacts its traversal, while it treads through the paths that here take the form or names of “purgatory” and “anteparadise.” Much of Zurita’s work envisions a utopian future wherein the dead are resurrected, the disappeared reappear, guilt is annulled or forgiven, and the Chilean community is redeemed. This explains why—in addition to being attacked—Zurita has been hailed as Neruda’s heir, as the de facto official poet of the transition; why, moreover, he has even been appropriated by the political Right¹⁴⁷.

¹⁴⁷ Ignacio Valente, for example, has written glowing reviews of Zurita’s books. Valente (whose real name is José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois) is an Opus Dei priest and right-wing literary critic who contributes regularly for the conservative newspaper *El mercurio*. Since the appearance of *Purgatorio* in 1979, Valente has expressed his admiration for Zurita, writing positively of *Anteparadiso* in 1982, *Canto a su amor desaparecido* in 1985, *El amor de Chile* in 1987, and, most recently, of *Poemas militantes* in 2000. I find Idelber Avelar’s reading of this curious episode insightful: “A telling phenomenon in the history of [Zurita’s] reception was a blessing by Pe. Ignacio Valente, Chile’s official literary critic and reviewer for the country’s widest-circulating newspaper, the ultraconservative *El mercurio*. Pe. Valente appropriated Zurita’s grandiose resemantization of the Chilean landscape and his design of a Christian pattern of fall and salvation, lauding him as the true successor of Pablo Neruda

Yet a careful reading contests this narrative, this mythification, this embrace of triumph and festivity. Focusing on *Purgatorio* and *INRI*, I would now like to explore some specific instances in which I see this undermining of triumph taking place.

The Failure of Resurrection

Like Neruda's speaker at the beginning of "Alturas de Macchu Picchu," the speaker of Zurita's first poetry collection, *Purgatorio*, finds himself in a radical state of solitude and desertion. But is the subject indeed alone in his ordeal? Or is the condition of aloneness shattered as soon as this word, *alone*, is pronounced? And does Zurita even utter this word, or does he utter it otherwise, in *other* words? I will attempt to answer this last question first by looking at the first page of *Purgatorio*, which includes a photograph of Zurita.¹⁴⁸ Before reading this page I should first point out that it is impossible to assert whether or not this is indeed the first poem of the

and Nicanor Parra. His analysis enveloped Zurita's poetry in a conservative Catholic rhetoric that neutralized the unsettling assemblages of Zurita's poetic language. The text's destructive thrust to break down genres, images, historical messages, national ontologies, and so on, lost its battle with the Christian message embedded in Zurita's text. In a struggle over the interpretation of one of Chile's most celebrated poets, the conservative establishment confronted an avant-gardism fascinated with the 'voluntarism of his utterances,' principles of both groups being represented in the very figure of Zurita. Meanwhile, Zurita's poetic production itself was absorbed by postdictatorial clichés, becoming increasingly patriotic and kitsch in its songs to and praises of the Chilean transition" (*The Untimely* 168).

¹⁴⁸ This photograph shows Zurita's left cheek patched up by two crossed band-aids, which somewhat give the impression of being branded by a cross. Zurita had burnt his face in the process of writing *Purgatorio*. According to Rodríguez Fernández, in this photograph Zurita appears as a "kind of martyr testifying to an unconvicted faith. His face and gesture allude to a sick Christ who, not content with turning the other cheek as a sign of humility and love, burns his face in an extreme act that may be seen as a show of insanity, neurosis, or martyrological flagellation" (115). Nelly Richard reads this gesture, along with Diamela Eltit's analogous self-wounding (photographs of which appear in her novel *Lumpérica* [1983]), from a more politically-grounded standpoint: "By inflicting upon themselves these emblems of the wounded body, Zurita and Eltit appeal to pain as a way of approaching that borderline between individual and collective experience: their self-punishment merges with an 'us' that is both redeemer and redeemed . . . Voluntary pain simply legitimates one's incorporation into the community of those who have been harmed in some way—as if the self-inflicted marks of chastisement in the artist's body and the marks of suffering in the national body, as if pain and its subject could unite in the same scar" (qtd. in Preda 273).

book, and therefore its proper beginning.¹⁴⁹ The reader is not sure whether the book begins here or with “Devoción” (16), a poem that also serves as a dedication to Diamela Eltit¹⁵⁰; or even before that, with the “mis amigos creen que / estoy muy mala / porque quemé mi mejilla” ‘my friends think that / I’ve been very bad / because I burnt my cheek’ (5), situated before “Devoción” and uttered by a female voice that may or may not be Zurita’s own. Perhaps the book does not begin as a text, but as a body, more specifically, as wounded flesh, as the burnt cheek of the author, a photograph of which appears on the front cover of the first edition, amplified as if to afford, in the words of José Miguel Oviedo, a “topographic view” of the flesh (104). Zurita himself describes this self-inflicted wound as the beginning of the book, indeed as the beginning of his career: “From that point on begins *Purgatorio*, *Anteparaiso*, and *La Vida Nueva*. It was an act of love and desperation” (Interview 86). Between Zurita’s photograph and “Devoción” is a page that includes the single verse “EN EL MEDIO DEL CAMINO” ‘IN THE MIDDLE OF THE JOURNEY/WAY’ (19), a verse which could be interpreted as the title of this book’s section, but which in any case participates in this incessant deferral of the beginning. “EN EL MEDIO DEL CAMINO” indicates that there are only “middles,” that no original step, no originary gesture by which everything else is put in motion, is ever taken. The book begins “En el medio del camino”, meaning it has always already taken the first step. This is true

¹⁴⁹ In Forest Gander’s words, “*Purgatory* doesn’t look anything like a conventional lyric poem. It is orchestrated like an opera, a dramatic performative work in multiple voices with essential props—an encephalogram, a photograph, a Xeroxed medical report, drawings, footnotes, diagrams, equations. Beginning “In the Middle of the Journey” like Dante’s eponymous masterpiece, Zurita’s *Purgatory* is staged in the Atacama Desert, in the pampas, in fields of hunger and delirium, in the imagining—at a time of crisis—of a way out, some possible future” (“Out of Delirium”)

¹⁵⁰ “A Diamela Eltit: la / Santísima Trinidad y la / Pornografía” ‘To Diamela Eltit: the / Holy Trinity and / Pornography’ (16-17).

not only of the book, but of Zurita's work as a whole, which itself begins in *Purgatorio*, having presumably already traversed through hell ("Inferno") and survived it, and now going forward towards an *Anteparaiso* and a *Vida Nueva*. In this way, we may say that just as Zurita's poetry concerns itself with deferring the end (whether this end is called resurrection, redemption, or reconciliation), it also dismisses, through unusual and heterogeneous techniques, the notion of a textual beginning or origin.

"EN EL MEDIO DEL CAMINO" refers to and can be read in conjunction with the next page, wherein Zurita's photograph is included and under which the phrase "EGO SUM" is written. As Castillo-Berchenko reminds, "En el medio del camino" represents a disloyal or "unfaithful"¹⁵¹ translation of the *Inferno*'s incipit, one which performs a certain violence to the primary text by not only wrenching it from its original place, but by mutilating the verse, by cutting it in half (70). In the *Inferno*, the complete verse reads: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita". What is lost, cut off from Zurita's rewriting of this verse is "di nostra vita," "of our lives." In other words, the iteration and affirmation of community. Conventionally, the pilgrim (the role of which the speaker assumes in this text) is always part of a whole, of a religious and

¹⁵¹ Castillo-Berchenko employs the word "infidel," alluding to a practice of translation first promoted by seventeenth century French translator Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt. In the prefaces to his translations of Lucian (1640) and Tacitus (1654), d'Ablancourt argues in favor of an assimilating or domesticating theory of translation that privileges the receiving culture rather than what he sees as the unproductive attempt to remain "faithful" to the original. Translations of this kind will thus become "les belles infidèles" ("beautiful but unfaithful"), an epithet that has been rightly criticized by contemporary feminist criticism. Although Castillo-Berchenko does not deal with this, it appears that Zurita activates implicitly the theme of infidelity in regards to the feminine personas that he assumes. From a conservative moral standpoint, the women in *Purgatorio* (Zurita/Raquel/Beatriz/Rosamunda/Manuela) have been "unfaithful" both to themselves and to God. They have transgressed the sanctity of their bodies—by wounding them and prostituting them; thus, they have "lost their way." Their actions, perceived by the social imaginary as immoral, have positioned them in a vulnerable state that makes it easy for the masculine order to punish them.

spiritual network that “oversees” his journey and guarantees its success; the pilgrim, by all traditional accounts, *should not* be in isolation, which is precisely what occurs here. With the *nostra* or “nosotros” gone, what remains is nothing but an “indefinite space in the middle of one’s life, a path leading nowhere”, a path marked by “emptiness and absence; mutilation and disappearance; silence” (Castillo-Berchenko 70). Zurita’s poetry can therefore be defined as a frustrated arrival—frustrated in the sense that no one receives it and that it receives no one, that no one, moreover, accompanies it through its journey; that there is no *nosotros*. Poetry not only says “Come”; it also says “I have arrived,” and this only to find out that everyone else has departed. Once again, coincidence, correspondence, adequacy, and faithfulness are absent; arrivals and departures fail to coincide; one or the other is either late or early—in any case, always untimely. “En el medio del camino” thus says, without saying it properly or explicitly, “I am alone,” and does this both through the author’s photograph and its “signature”: *Ego Sum*.

Once again, this photograph portrays Zurita himself, his cheek covered with band aids. This image has been rightly interpreted as either evoking or explicitly mimicking an identification photograph. In this way, it would evoke the apparatus of surveillance and vigilance deployed by dictatorial regimes. Attending to its religious, specifically Christic connotations, the subject in the photograph may also be read as saying, “Here I am”, “Here is my body”: once again, *Ego Sum*, which are precisely the words written below the photograph. Divided by a blank space, under the photograph and at the bottom of the page “EGO SUM” is printed in large, bold letters. The phrase runs or bleeds onto the facing page, wherein QUI SUM is written. In this way, EGO

SUM QUI SUM ends up being slip in the middle by the book's seam. This is of course the response that God gives to Moses when asked for his name: depending on the translation, "I am that I am," "I be that I be." Uttered by the subject in the photograph, this phrase may be read as a synonym for his abandonment. In the absence of a *nosotros*, a tautological "I am" would be the only thing that persists. Read in conjunction, "En el medio del camino" and EGO SUM would perhaps thus say: "En el medio del camino yo soy, yo soy quien soy" ("In the middle of the road I am, I am who I am"). Put differently: in the middle of the road I find myself and only myself, I find no other but myself.

Thus begins *Purgatorio*, by declaring aloneness or community's absence. Indeed, when asked in an interview whether this book shared anything in common with CADA's sense of collective support, Zurita explains: "No; it's the work of a lone individual . . . In *Purgatorio* there is a pain, a pathos, a solitude and exacerbation that is impossible to achieve in a collective work" (Entrevista 85). He thus opposes the collective spirit that united CADA to the solitude that inspired *Purgatorio*. The way in which the answer is worded underscores the meaning he wishes to convey, for Zurita does not say "Es la obra de sólo un individuo" ("It's the work of a single individual"), but rather "Es la obra de un individuo solo," the work of an individual who is *alone*.

Yet, once again, is the subject indeed alone? Or does this utterance, "I am alone", seem somewhat "ludicrous", as Maurice Blanchot would see it. "A writer who writes 'I am alone' or, like Rimbaud, 'I am actually from beyond the grave' can seem a little ludicrous." He goes on to say:

It is comical to be aware of one's solitude while addressing a reader, making use of means that keep one from being alone. The word *alone* is as general as the word *bread*. As soon as one utters it, one makes present everything that it excludes. These aporias of language are rarely taken seriously. It is enough that words do their job and that literature never stops seeming possible. The "I am alone" of the writer has a simple meaning (no one is near me) that the use of language only seems to contradict. (Introduction 1)

For Blanchot, the one who writes addresses someone even in the absence of a real presence. As a writer, my message never comes back to myself. I remain in dialogue even when no one faces me. It is in this sense that the one who writes is never alone. Writing brings near, *as absent*, the one who is not here.¹⁵²

The condition of possibility for aloneness is thus togetherness. Complete solitude, absolute withdrawal or separation—if at all possible—would not signify aloneness. In the purported absence of all ties one still shares a tie, even if it is a negative or painful one. Community persists in the visible absence of community. What's more, the more seemingly absent the community, the greater the hope in community becomes. This "logic" would agree with Blanchot's description of hope, which, as I explained before, argues that hope intensifies with the very withdrawal of its object. If for Blanchot the writer's desolate call brings the Other into presence *as absent*, the speakers in Zurita's poetry perform a similar act: rather than attempting a real or metaphoric resurrection, they bring the dead Other into presence *as dead*. If the living community should relate with the dead (and it would seem that for Zurita it must), the only ethical way of doing so is by respecting their death, by accepting the

¹⁵² Heidegger speaks of this paradox in similar terms. For him, a certain togetherness or being-with is a necessary condition of aloneness. In his words: "Only he can be lonesome who is not alone, if 'not alone' means not apart, singular, without any rapports. But it is precisely the absence in the lonesome of something in common which persists as the most bidding bond with it. The 'some' in lonesome is the Gothic sama, the Greek hama, and the English same. 'Lonesome' means: the same in what unites that which belongs together". (qtd. in Lacoue-Labarthe 99)

truth of their absence, by resisting the temptation to deny, sublimate, or render their death operative in any way.

The subject is therefore alone in this paradoxical sense. Alone, yet in intimate relation with respect to that which he feels distant. In fact, the Zuritan subject is constantly addressing this absent Other; indeed, at times he seems to announce his or her seemingly glorious advent, a real coming into presence, the manifestation of a proper body. As an example, we may look at two scenes in *Anteparaiso* where the speaker fantasizes about the miraculous return of the disappeared, a return that would in turn signify the collective resurrection of the Chilean community:

Entonces despiértate, despiértate riendo que has llegado
despiértate y desata las cadenas que te tenían atada
ya no volverás a cargarlas
ni llevarás más sobre tu cuello el peso de la vergüenza
porque nuevamente nos hemos visto
y Chile entero se ha levantado para mirarte
¡hija de mi patria!.

So awaken, awaken laughing for you've arrived
awaken and undo the chains that have kept you bound
no more chains
nor bearing the burden of shame on your neck
For we've seen one another again
and all Chile has risen to behold you
daughter of my homeland! (*Anteparadise* 146-47)

porque lo que moría renació y lo vivo vivió dos veces
porque volvió a brotar el amor que nos teníamos
y ahora caminas libre por las calles
tú que estabas cautiva.

Because what died was reborn and the living lived twice
For our love has blossomed again
and now you walk the streets free
you who were captive (*Anteparadise* 152-53)

In the first excerpt, the speaker proclaims a double resurrection: the resurrection of the

beloved and the resurrection of the nation. Both the individual and the community rise up to the event, finding their gazes reciprocated. The beloved is described patriotically as a kind of prodigal daughter who has managed to break her bondage and reunite with the community. The second excerpt also describes the beloved as a former prisoner who has recently regained her freedom, imagining this event as a resurrection or re-blossoming. With the image of the chained, female prisoner, Zurita may be alluding to the traditional depiction within the Latin American popular imaginary of the lonely soul in purgatory (*ánima sola*), a figure frequently depicted surrounded by flames and with her wrists chained. The *ánima sola*'s fate is here reverted: accepted by the community and enveloped by the "flames" of love, her seemingly interminable ordeal has come to an end.

Yet this celebration of presence and resurrection is short-lived. Through a gesture common in Zurita's poetry, the celebratory atmosphere is quickly shattered.

Thus, a poem appearing soon after presents the following scene:

Pero no; arrojados sobre la hierba todavía
parecían estremecerse
y sus dedos aun señalaban hacia la aldea
como si la viesen
Sin embargo, inmóviles, sólo sus camisas
se agitan bajo el viento que pasa:
tus ojos que pasan son el esplendor del viento sobre la hierba.

But no; strewn over the grass they
still seemed to be twitching
and their fingers kept pointing toward the village
as though they could see it
Motionless, however, only their shirts
wave in the passing wind:
your passing eyes
are the splendor of the wind on the grass (*Anteparadise* 180-81)

What we witness here, through the categorical and forceful phrase “Pero no,” as well as through the use of the conditional and the uncertainty of a “como si,” is the impossibility of arrival. There is, in fact, no resurrection, no miraculous return. Instead of a full, liberated, and joyous body, we are presented with the melancholy image of garments flapping in the wind (“only their shirts / wave in the passing wind”), which may signal the body’s former presence but also underscore its irreversible departure. In other words, not the body itself, but its pathetic and, once again, *inadequate* trace.

Writing against a Hegelian conception of resurrection, which would here be synonymous with, or take its definition from *Aufhebung* (an uplifting, going up, or tending towards a higher position), that would seek to dialecticize or sublimate death—Nancy invites us to view resurrection as a movement or gesture that *keeps* death, that acknowledges the pull of elevation while simultaneously remaining mindful of or in touch with the tomb. Resurrection would thus be a holding-on rather than an uplifting of death: “Not an erection, either in the phallic sense or in the monumental sense, although these senses could be brought into this context, but a sustaining oneself upright [*un se-tenir-debout*] in front of and in death” (*Noli* 34). Nancy chooses the verb *se tenir* to signify this gesture that consents to death while refusing to transform or valorize it—in the sense of turning it into something productive, something that would yield a profit: the hero’s death, for instance, which immortalizes the life of its subject and serves as an example to others (of patriotism, loyalty to nation, devotion to a certain set of values, etc.); or the martyr’s death (religious or secular), whose sacrifice also becomes a banner for a certain cause. Not a going ahead

or beyond death, but rather a sustaining oneself *before* and *in* death, in the face of the tomb which is the face of death, a sustaining oneself that would renounce all activity and empowerment, that does not claim to attain its force from itself, from a subject that would still be in possession of itself, but that attains its sustainment from a radical otherness: “*anastasis* does not signal or arise from the self, from the subject itself, but from the Other: it comes to the self from the Other, or arises from the Other within the self, or again, it is the raising of the Other within the self” (35). A sustaining oneself that would thus be synonymous with passivity (without becoming a mere synonym for lethargy), and, by extension, with passion. The raising of the body should thus be interpreted not in the habitual sense ascribed to it (an actual corpse that regains its life, that rises, that sheds off its drapes and walks, a body that leaves its death behind). Rather, it should be seen as a looking both forward and back (the heavens and the tomb) while dwelling in the now of mortality; a passive and passionate act that accepts its oblivion and sustains itself in it without wishing to overcome or surmount it. In one word, to consent to death. This does not imply that Nancy views resurrection as the simple overcoming of material decay nor as the mere prelude to an afterlife. Resurrection is incommensurable to both of these extremes. It is neither subordinated to a vertical movement of ascension nor to the horizontal inertness of matter. Resurrection, as a sustaining oneself within death, privileges neither of these two lines (neither ascension to the heavens nor a collapse onto the earth) but rather seeks to inhabit the point at which both intersect. Resurrection acquires its true significance, in Nancy’s words, “as a perpendicular verticality with respect to the horizontality of the tomb—neither fleeing it nor reducing it to nothing, but affirming in it the sustainment

(and even restraint) of something untouchable, inaccessible” (33).

Elsewhere, Nancy states that what is uplifted in this type of resurrection is not a body nor a subject, but death itself. “To resuscitate death is entirely different from resuscitating the dead” (“Blanchot’s” 89). Looking at the biblical story of Lazarus, Nancy and Blanchot distinguish between two different Lazaruses: on the one hand, the supernatural Lazarus who conquers death through Christ’s intervention—a “character from a miraculous story” (91); on the other, a Lazarus who “lives his dying as he dies his living” (92)—a Lazarus who keeps life and death simultaneously, who does not come back to life, who does not return from death but makes “death live qua death” (91). The “resurrection of death” is the phrase used by Blanchot (Nancy admits he “may have used it only once”) in order to rethink the concept of resurrection under a different light, to redefine it in a radical way, such that it would signify “not a crossing through death, but death itself as a crossing” (91). In this way, Nancy explains, resurrection becomes “no longer a question of bringing a dead man back from the grave but of seeing the tombstone itself as ‘the presence,’ whose ‘opacity’ is not to be dispelled but recognized and affirmed as a truth of the awaited transparency, or as ‘obscurity’ . . . qua true ‘clarity’” (94). Put in different terms, it is to witness “the stone as light” (95).

To rescue from death through the fantasy of resurrection signifies the refusal of uttering a phrase or word that would be equivalent to saying—to he or she who departs—“until never.”¹⁵³ When we say “goodbye,” we are really saying “until later”. Our languages prevent us from enunciating the idea of a departure that does not yield a

¹⁵³ “Until never” would still be an inadequate expression inasmuch as it promises a future, an event to come and to be fulfilled.

return. This is precisely Nancy's and Derrida's complaint. In an essay titled "Consolation, Desolation," Nancy rereads Derrida's memorial addresses, given on the occasion of some of his closest friends' deaths,¹⁵⁴ and agrees with Derrida's assessment that the word "Adieu" ("Adios," in Spanish), often pronounced at someone's death, is insufficient, for it inevitably signifies a kind of resurrection. With "Adios," a death does not signify a true death, but rather points to either a future encounter (between the survivor and the deceased, between the deceased and God) or to salvation. The "Adieu" or "goodbye" is pronounced with the thought, comfort, and desire that the deceased has moved on to a better place, that the deceased, furthermore, is not alone, since he/she has joined a community—truer and more pious—situated in an afterworld and directly in contact with the divine (in English, the word "goodbye," originally signifying "God be with you," exemplifies this fantasy: the deceased is not alone in his/her brief travail through death, but accompanied by the most comforting and reassuring of companionships one could ever hope for, that of the Most High). "Adieu," Derrida and Nancy argue, should instead signify the impossibility of a return, it "should in no way signify a rendezvous with God but, on the contrary, a definitive leave-taking, an irremissible abandonment—as much an abandonment of the deceased other to his effacement as an abandonment of the survivor to the rigorous privation of all hope in some kind of after-life, whether that of the other or indeed, ultimately, of the survivor himself: I, who salute the other, whom another will salute, some other day" ("Consolation" 98).

The idea of resurrection—the desire for or refusal of its performance—

¹⁵⁴ See Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*.

becomes, according to Nancy, a matter of tactility: on the one hand the desire to touch—and to touch in order to save—the dead. To say that the dead are untouchable is to say that they cannot be saved, to accept their final departure and to pronounce an “adios” that would not suggest a return or profit. The dead cannot be saved for the simple reason, Nancy reminds, that they are already “safe,” that is to say “whole, unscathed, intact” (“Consolation” 99): “What is safe is thus not the saved, separated from the injury or the pollution that had touched it, rather it is that (or that one, he; that one, she) which remains intact, out of reach—that which has never been touched.” The death of a human being places us in relation to the untouchable; it places us in front of an abyss that must be saluted, that is to say, acknowledged and endured, granting us the knowledge that a world has been lost, granting us that very world in its absence. The death of a human being constitutes the end of a world and of a universe, an apocalypse as such:

We must recognize, in each death, the end of the world, and not simply the end of a world: not a momentary interruption in the chain of possible worlds, but rather the annihilation with neither reserve nor compensation ‘of the sole and unique world,’ ‘which makes each living being a single and unique one.’ We must say ‘adieu’ without return, in the implacable certainty that the other will not turn back, will never return. (98)

This is exactly what is recognized in *INRI*, a fairly recent book which struggles to articulate the fate of the “desaparecidos” while wrestling with the desire for their resurrection. A very real and tragic practice inspires the imagery of the book: during the dictatorship, prisoners would be flown—by helicopter or plane—to the Pacific Ocean, where, handcuffed or tied, they would be thrown into the waters. Their final movement—descent—and the space that became their grave—the ocean—becomes

here the movement and space adopted by *INRI*. The first half of *INRI* recounts the bodies' fall into the waters, where they are described as bait for the fish.¹⁵⁵ As in Derrida and Nancy, each life is described as an irreplaceable world, each death as the destruction of a universe: "Universos, cosmos, inacabados vientos lloviendo en / miles de carnadas rosas sobre el mar carnívoro de / Chile" (20); "Hay / universos sin fin en el estómago de los peces" 'Universes, cosmoses, unfinished winds raining down as / countless pink baits on the carnivorous sea of / Chile' (21). The book is populated by a series of frustrated actions, contributing to an overall sense of abrupt and violent cessation: "un amor que no alcanzó a decirse," "amores inconclusos," "días claros e inconclusos" 'a love that could not be uttered,' 'unfinished loves,' 'clear and unfinished days' (17), "palabras que no alcanzaron a decirse," "despedida trunca," "rezo no oído," "amor no dicho" 'words that could not be uttered,' 'truncated farewell,' 'unheard prayer,' 'unexpressed love' (19), "amores que ya nunca" 'loves that never again' (25), "ya no" 'not anymore' (20).

Like *Anteparaíso*, *INRI* is filled with visions of resurrections and arrivals. Nonetheless, and like *Anteparaíso*, *INRI* ultimately negates the very teleological movement it traces. It imagines the utopian return of the disappeared ones, here bearing the names of Bruno and Susana. The voice of the speaker summons these names, these bodies, announcing and preparing their imminent visit through this exact word: "Come". His call, it would seem, is answered: "bones" give way to "flesh",

¹⁵⁵ "Sorprendentes carnadas" 'amazing baits' is most often the description given to these bodies; adjectives like "extrañas" ("strange") and "asombrosas" ("astonishing") are also employed. In one occasion, the phrase "raros frutos" ("strange fruits") is used (20), an obvious reference to Billie Holiday's 1939 song "Strange Fruit," where this image symbolizes the lynched body of an African American man, a body in infinite suspension rather than in infinite fall (but aren't the two movements synonymous, insofar as an infinite fall is a kind of suspension without end?).

emptiness to presence:

Y te amaré de nuevo y te diré ven. Y tú me amarás
de nuevo y me dirás ven. Y el cielo abriéndose nos
dirá ven que igual que lavas rojas cubriendo las
montañas nuestras carnes nos cubrirán de nuevo
los nevados huesos de todo Los Andes y te amaré
de nuevo y será ven.

And I will love you again and I will say to you come. And you will love me
again and you will say to me come. And the sky as it opens up will
say to us come and like red lava covering the mountains
our flesh will cover again our snowy bones the Andes
and I will love you again and it will be come. (135)

Elsewhere, the return of Bruno and Susana is described as a “coming home”: “Bruno dice que ha vuelto a casa, Susana también / dice que ha vuelto a casa,” “Bruno dice que ha llegado a casa. Susana también lo dice” ‘Bruno says he has returned home, Susana also / says she has returned home,’ ‘Bruno says he has arrived home. Susana says it as well’ (123).¹⁵⁶ But as was the case in *Anteparaiso*—perhaps even more

¹⁵⁶ “Bruno dice que ha vuelto a casa”: this verse alludes to the title of a documentary film by Silvio Caiozzi, *Fernando ha vuelto* (1998), which recounts the painstaking process of giving identity to the unearthed body of a person murdered by the military regime. Thanks to the advancements in science and DNA testing, the nameless corpse reacquires its lost identity and reclaims its original name: Fernando Olivares Mori. The important difference with Zurita’s Bruno is that Caiozzi’s Fernando *does*—metaphorically—resurrect. Lazzara recounts the climactic scene of the film: “Before the viewer’s eyes, an x-ray of Fernando’s skull (scientific and impersonal) gradually morphs into a human face. Fernando’s teeth, almost magically, come to match the smile of a living photo” (108). While the medium (science) by which Fernando’s miraculous “refacement” takes place is highly “impersonal” and objective, the result has the opposite trait: it reestablishes “personhood” and subjectivity, turning anonymity into individuality, granting a name to he who had been dispossessed of it. Fernando is again humanized, distinguished, distinct, made to smile once more, his arid skull repopulated with flesh: incarnation at its most literal. Unlike poetry, which finds itself unable to produce a body, it would seem here that film (technology) claims for itself that miraculous potential. Fernando’s journey from absence to presence is reminiscent of a more famous episode in the history of “resurrections” aided by science, which Mondzain treats in her study of icons: the Shroud of Turin. The story is well-known: an object of both adoration and controversy since the sixth century, the shroud was allowed to be photographed in 1898 by a lawyer named Secundo Pia. By accident, the purported image of Christ was revealed in the photograph’s negative, an event which many, including Pope Leo XIII, hailed as the real and indisputable proof of Christ’s historical existence. Mondzain views this curious episode as a rare instance of collaboration and agreement between science and religion. In this example, photography “was put to the service of the unrepresentable in order to reveal the invisible” (193). Like the passage, in Fernando’s story, from bone to flesh, enacted by the authority of film, photography here enacts a

forcefully and violently—such utopian arrival finds itself frustrated, interrupted. The shattering of illusion occurs here in the last poem or “Epilogue” of the book, where the speaker declares:

Cientos de cuerpos fueron arrojados sobre las
montañas, lagos y mar de Chile. Un sueño quizás
soñó que habían unas flores, que habían unas
rompientes, un océano subiéndolos salvos desde sus
tumbas en los paisajes. No.

Están muertos. Fueron ya dichas las inexistentes
flores. Fue ya dicha la inexistente mañana.

Hundreds of bodies were thrown on the
mountains, lakes, and ocean of Chile. A dream perhaps
dreamed that there were some flowers, that there were
some breakers, an ocean that raised them unscathed out of
their tombs on the landscape. No.

They are dead. The inexistent flowers have now
been said. The inexistent morning has now been said. (*INRI* 143)

This “No” denies the fantasy of arrival. The speaker, instead, transmits a cruel knowledge: “Hundreds of bodies were thrown on the / mountains, lakes, and ocean of Chile.” Poetry finds itself abandoned, impotent against the work of death. The Nerudian “My dream is no dream but earth” is replaced here by the much more precarious “A dream perhaps / dreamed.” Once again, this logic by which the triumph of resurrection is recounted and ultimately denied is typical of Zurita’s work.

Anteparaiso, for example, also includes a poem titled “Epílogo” (which is not, however, the last poem of the book). By incorporating references to earth and

“passage from light to a darkness [the darkness of the negative] that is so revealing, as is the one from the revelatory darkness to the charismatic light of presence [. . .] the image of what died yesterday and remains alive today; in a word, this opposite world so similar to ours that is shown to us, mimetic and painless—all this is everything that turns photography, as a providential invention, into a redemptive and authenticating technique” (201). The one through film, the other through photography, Fernando and Christ are resurrected from death, replicating the gesture of a not-too-distant companion and archetype of successful resurrections: Lazarus.

dreaming, this poem also alludes to (but denies) the reality of the Nerudian “earth” and prefigures the uncertain “dream” that would later appear in *INRI*:

Recortados en la noche, como espejismos, con las manos
recogíamos puñados de tierra y del pasto verde
que crecía. Sé que todo esto no fue más que un sueño
pero aquella vez fue tan real
el peso de la tierra en mis manos, que llegué a creer
que todos los valles nacerían a la vida

Standing against the night, like mirages, we gathered
fistfuls of earth and green grass in our hands
I know that all this was only a dream but that time
the weight of the soil in my hands
was so real that I even began to believe
that all the valleys would come to life (*Anteparadise* 170-71)

Inasmuch as they speak of arrivals (which ultimately, however, do not arrive), the speakers in Zurita’s poetry may be seen as modern-day John the Baptists. In the gospels, John the Baptist is described as the one who exhorts the people to “Prepare the Way for the Lord,” “to make straight paths for Him” (Matthew 3:1-3). If the biblical voice marks the way and prepares the advent of Christ, the Zuritan voice may be said to mark the way and prepare the advent of Bruno and Susana. Yet these two voices are not analogous. John’s voice not only announces the coming of Christ; it also announces “its own exhaustion, its own disappearance, its own effacement” (Chretien 64). Indeed, this effacement is not simply metaphorical or symbolic, but literal. With the proper arrival of Christ, John’s voice, the voice that announces, is no longer needed. When announcement and arrival coincide, becoming contemporaneous with each other, the voice falls silent (symptomatically, John the Baptist is ultimately decapitated; his death comes at the place from which voice emerges: the throat). While John’s voice may have announced the coming of the Messiah, it also announced

an apocalypse: the apocalypse that occurs when the call and that to which it calls correspond or come into absolute contact with each other: the apocalypse of an adequate answer. Zurita's voice may be condemned to issuing a call that will never be reciprocated. Yet it knows that its song will not be fatally interrupted. If Zurita's call fails, this is because it refuses to envision the actual arrival of the Other, and this because that arrival would signify the death of voice and of passion, as well as the death of the Other (having arrived, there would no longer be a need to call or relate to this Other). It becomes a difference between a voice that wishes to die, or that at least accepts the price of death—a sacrificial voice—and one that simply does not wish to die, that postpones its annihilation, thereby sustaining both itself and the other alive *in* death. Thus, when Zurita says in the Preface to *Anteparaíso* “I would like our New Life to end with those words,” meaning the words that would signify a New Life—triumph, resurrection, redemption, reconciliation—he immediately adds—paraphrasing his signature “pero no”—“Except that I do not want my love to die” (*Anteparaíso* 25).

CONCLUSION

The conclusion to a project of this kind (a book or a dissertation) is normally the place where the preceding argument is summarized, and where this is done so, ideally, with great economy and with particular authority. It is the space which brings the text to some kind of closure—ideally, an argumentative closure from which the reader would leave convinced, persuaded as to the “truth” (reasoning, structuring, progression, knowledge exhibited, connections established, etc.) of the project. Yet a conclusion can also, I think, be a space of exposure, a space where one can perhaps exercise less restraint and enjoy a certain kind of freedom, and of doing so by, ironically, exposing one’s limits (as an academic, as a scholar), by highlighting certain arguments, concepts, metaphors, or proper names that, either intentionally or by the exigencies of the theoretical plot, were left outside, displaced, or not given the space they would have otherwise deserved in our writing. I would thus like to conclude this dissertation by suggesting or establishing openings, gaps, lines of potential departure, rather than by imposing a triumphant closure. I do this by reference to a number of concepts, images, metaphors, and quotes which did not find room within my text, but which nonetheless invariably touched me, kindled or rekindled my thinking, left me with a sense of awe, and in some way or another determined the paths of my dissertation. One could even say that it is these spectral references—now inadequately acknowledged—what lie behind or beneath the preceding pages as their precarious foundation.

The Book of Nightmares, a collection of poems by the American poet Galway

Kinnell, begins with an epigraph by Rilke, which reads: “But this, though: death, / the whole of death,— even before life’s begun, / to hold it all so gently, and be good: / this is beyond description!” *The Book of Nightmares* is dedicated to Maud and Fergus—Kinnell’s children. Through these poems, Kinnell teaches his children about *death*, about the reality and the limit that is death. Maud and Fergus learn that they begin to die the moment they come into being, “even before life’s begun.” This should not cause them fear. Instead, death is a limit and a condition which they should learn to embrace, “to hold it all so gently,” rather than to fight or seek to overcome. It is a “lesson” imparted in a different context and out of a different constellation of social and political circumstances, by a certain Chilean poetic tradition.

In *The Ends of Literature*, Brett Levinson at one point retakes the dichotomy of mourning and melancholia, and indicates the following: “The melancholic, that is, fails to mourn, to accept the past as past and the dead as dead” (35). Elsewhere, he suggests that “Loss is not a metaphor for death but the means of its disavowal. If the dead can be posited as lost, the promise of their return remains: the return of the one who hence overcomes death, who reveals death as ‘overcomeable’” (86). Perhaps the speaker in Neruda’s *Canto general* is a melancholic character in this sense. If the Nerudian subject dwells on the catastrophe, it is only to be able to deny its truth and to overcome it. The dead cannot be altogether dead. The Nerudian subject disavows death by positing the “dead” as receptive to the poet’s resurrectional word. Their relationship thus “reveals death as ‘overcomeable.’”

In *The Ends of Literature*, Levinson speaks about what he calls the “limit-experience.” It is not necessary for me to describe here what Levinson understands by

this term. Nonetheless, the description he gives at one point to this concept uncannily sums up one of the arguments I have tried to make. “[I]f the limit-experience,” he says, “in fact pushes the self toward the Other, commitment to the Other represents a gesture that neither ‘forgets’ (as does impunity) nor avenges devastation, loss, and radical injustice. Rather, this commitment stands as an active response to the disaster, a means for building coalitions which are the result, even the ‘illegitimate child’ of the disaster, but move beyond it, initiating possible future generations” (Levinson 52). One way to respond to the catastrophe (the violence of the Conquest) is given by Neruda as precisely the desire to avenge; another way to respond to the catastrophe (the violence of the dictatorship) is given by the democratic, neoliberal political program as the desire to forget; yet another response to the catastrophe is offered by the likes of Mistral, Dittborn, and Zurita (and no doubt others artists and poets of whom I have no knowledge) as the desire to articulate community and relationality *from* the catastrophe, as *the very child* of the catastrophe.

Perhaps this project has done nothing but highlight the same thing differently, which is the *impossibility of returning home* (or the necessity thereof). In *Counterpath* (a book co-written by Jacques Derrida and Catherine Malabou), Malabou suggests that the traditional treatment of the topic of the *voyage* privileges the movement of the return over that of wandering, “what stays always carries the day over whatever detours or disconcerts” (4). The paradigmatic instance of this type of voyage is, of course, *The Odyssey*. “Ulysses cannot not return” home (6). In this sense, the home, the origin—and the return thereto—are never put into question. “Ulysses’s path would therefore be a *derived drift*, apart from yet toward a founding point”; likewise,

“the origin does not travel,” guaranteeing as it must the hero’s wandering (6; author’s emphasis). Derrida wonders if one can conceive instead of a voyage *without truth*, one that “would never again reach the thing itself . . . would above all never touch it” (28). “Such a voyage,” Malabou explains, “would stand rather in the imminence of a catastrophe that ‘tears no veil.’” Derrida also calls this “deconstructive” voyage, this departure without return, “a return to life that’s not a resurrection.” One would have to wonder whether an instance of this “failed” voyage, this counter-odyssey, is precisely what the reader witnesses in Bruno’s voyage and in Susanna’s voyage, both of whom claim to have “return home” in Zurita’s *INRI*.

In *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben cites Walter Benjamin’s description of the Kingdom of the Messiah (a description he had presumably heard from Gershom Scholem). According to Benjamin, “‘A rabbi, a real cabalist, once said that in order to establish the reign of peace it is not necessary to destroy everything nor to begin a completely new world. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this bush or this stone just a little, and thus everything.’” Benjamin adds elsewhere that “Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different” (qtd. in Agamben, *The Coming* 53). My project can be described as an exploration of these two versions of the Kingdom of the Messiah, these two versions of the “ideal” community. On the one hand, a catastrophic community that believes it is “necessary to destroy everything,” to “begin a completely new world.” On the other, a fragile community that acts in an unspectacular, imperceptible, feeble manner; wherein things

are “just a little different,” yet wherein this little difference makes all the difference. This small difference or “slight displacement” is, in my reading, the acceptance of death as a limit.

Ann Smock explains Maurice Blanchot’s notion of the *disaster* in the following way: “that there should be no difference (no difference as difference is ordinarily understood) between disaster and none at all: this is the disaster. That there should be no change: this is the change, the ‘radical change’ (*changement radical*)” (X). Like Benjamin’s description of the coming of the Messiah (which is non-evental in the sense that it only brings about a “slight change”), for Blanchot the “true” disaster goes by unnoticed. It is in this sense that Blanchot references a version of the coming of the Messiah promoted by certain Jewish “commentators.” Disguised as a beggar “at the gates of Rome,” the Messiah, having returned to earth, is approached by someone and asked: “When will you come?” (*The Writing* 141). The “event” of his arrival is therefore synonymous with its “nonoccurrence.” Like the disaster, the Messiah’s arrival does not produce a visible rupture, does not take here the form of a spectacular event. By minimizing the exemplary, disruptive, or singular nature of the Messiah’s presence, this anecdote stresses the importance of suspending, of prolonging both his coming and his arrival, of potentially viewing *any* person as the Messiah himself, and of thinking that “It is now and always now” that the divine kingdom (the community) is produced. In a similar way, I have tried to minimize or to explain the articulation of community within a certain body of Chilean poetry as not depending so much on the founding truth of a visible catastrophe (whether it is called revolution, emancipation, redemption, or resurrection), but instead as an ongoing

engagement with what, for lack of a better word, I have termed *fragility*. Just as Blanchot resignifies the word *disaster*, perhaps this demand, this response, and this sustainment of the fragile on the part of the community may grant a new sense to the word *catastrophe*.

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